

Together to the Future

by Blazonix

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Summary: He finds himself waking up as Kiba in a story he knows well. It doesn't truly faze him, and life goes on in its strange way. Then he finds out he's not alone... Cross-posted to Ao3.

## 1. Moving Forward

He wakes up to a bright, new day, if the sun streaming through the window is any indication. Birds chirp in the distant, his bed is neither too soft nor too hard, and his nails have ripped a hole in the sheets like always.

Something about that isn't quite right.

He muses on it for a moment, enjoying the comfortable atmosphere.

"OI!" the cry of a demon echoes throughout the world, "BOY, YOU HAD BETTER BE UP! DON'T MAKE ME COME GET YOU!"

He rolls out of bed, taking the sheets with him, and smacks into a dresser he most definitely doesn't own.

"Well. Shit."

...

There are no mirrors in the bedroom that he wakes up in. It has a lovely shade of green for walls, and the furniture is also the most sturdy he has ever seen, even with all the scratches.

Nonetheless, he really needs a mirror because he does not recall going to sleep last night with claws.

He smells his way to the bathroom. (It's gross, gross, gross, can no one smell that?)

Either the doors in this place are huge, or he has shrunk overnight. (And gained claws at that, can alcohol do that? He's swearing off drinking forever) It takes some stretching but he opens the door to a toilet and sink which, thankfully, has a mirror.

Unfortunately, this mirror happens to be above the sink and far above his head.

Grumbling about giant people, he manages to locate a blue stool under the sink and hops on top of it, only to tumble off after a single glance at his reflection. His other foot catches the underside of the stool and sends it flying behind him.

"STOP PLAYING AROUND UP THERE!" Says the demon voice from earlier.

He frowns up at the ceiling. Things must have gotten quite weird last night.

Unable to stand the stench of urine for much longer, he grabs the stool and decides to get a better look at himself.

It isn't as much a shock the second time to see a tiny Kiba Inuzuka looking back at him. (Or is it Inuzuka Kibaâ€|?)

He stares at his new reflection. It stares back. It feels like the world is unbalanced, and then he leans a bit to the right and that takes care of that.

Well, whatever happens, happens, he decides. Time to keep moving forward. (He can't stand being in here for much longer anyway)

...

"About damn time, brat!"

He flinches at the source of the demon voice. He had smelled his way to what was obviously the kitchen, after flinging on some new clothes. To his misfortune, the demon has been waiting for him.

"You already missed breakfast, you runt! After what you did last night, don't expect me to feed you until lunch." The demon barks down to him.

So apparently last night has been shitty for everyone. Good to know he was on the same page here.

"You're going to be helping your sister out today to make it up to her, and if you cause her any problems I will beat you until you can't stand back up. Are. We. Clear?" the demon snarls to him.

"Yes, ma'am." He squeaks.

"Ma, not ma'am. I ain't no lady, and mothers are far more frightening than ladies." His demon of a mother grins savagely.

...

It is a disaster. There is just so much fur.

"Haimaru Brothers, grab and snatch!" His fierce new sister barks.

Three dogs leap into action immediately, and he feels teeth grab the back of his shirt and then everything just blurs.

The owner of the teeth all but throw him at his sister's feet. Hana looks down at him, completely unimpressed.

Well, it isn't like he did this on purpose.

"Corral them back into their pens, and if they give you trouble, you know what to do." She growls ominously at her partners before reaching down to grab him by the back of the shirt.

"Do I still have to wash them?" He asks, giving her the most teary-eyed look he can muster.

It isn't hard; getting tackled by hungry animals that had sprung a jailbreak is rather trying.

"I," she stresses, "am taking you home where our mother can deal with you."

She shakes him when he starts to whine.

...

It is love at first sight.

"Kiba, let go."

This is his partner; his best friend, the other part of his soul.

"You can take Akamaru over my dead body!" He yells shrinking further into the cage.

He gently rubs the little puppy as he shakes.

"It's okay; we're going to be awesome." He whispers to him.

"I'm seriously considering it!" Hana barks.

It takes two Inuzuka clan members and their ninken to secure the rest of the puppies and drag him out. He fights the whole way, but eventually they take Akamaru from him.

It's only when Akamaru begins crying and he "accidentally" kicks his cousin with chakra that they get it.

"Okay, fine! You can have Akamaru. Now sit down and shut up." Hana barks.

He stops trying to claw his cousin's arm off immediately.

"He'll need to be with his mother for a little while, but you can sit here with him every day until you can take him home with you." Hana

says rather gently and ruffles his hair.

He beams at her.

"What about me?" Cousin Toshiro demands.

"What about you?" Hana scoffs.

"Do you see my arm? What about what he did to my leg!" His ninken growls threateningly by his side.

Hana isn't having any of that.

"Kiba, hold Akamaru and stand still." She orders handing him his precious new partner.

He holds Akamaru protectively and watches as she cracks her knuckles. The Haimaru Brothers are at her side in an instant and Cousin Toshiro doesn't stand a chance.

Her brutality is both terrifying and beautiful. He can only admire the teamwork between her and her partners; one day he hopes Akamaru and he can achieve the same balance.

Cousin Toshiro flies past him into the wall with a grunt, his ninken follows, and Hana tells the fallen Inuzuka member to get back to work.

He has the greatest sister in the world.

...

Once Akamaru can see and Sis no longer needs to care for him, his Ma takes him out to smell.

It might sound weird for anyone outside the Inuzuka clan, but for him it's a desperately needed training session.

The first few days mostly compose of smelling anything and everything, the next, memorizing. Before he even realizes it, he begins filtering and recognizing.

His Ma is a rough but steady guide through it all.

She ruffles his hair when he asks about the limits.

"You can amplify and suppress with chakra. You're not ready for that."

Then he feels her nails dig into his scalp and the grin that she wears is alarming.

"Since you're asking that you must be bored. I know just the thing to liven up your day."

His training intensifies after that.

...

Ninken are everything to the Inuzuka. Most partners die together, and

should one survive the other, they will never have another partner again.

There are no secrets between them, and the moment Akamaru can completely understand him, he tells him everything.

His past life, waking up in a manga, what his favorite color is, everything.

Akamaru believes him, and that is that.

...

There are exactly five momentous events in a shinobi's life.

Entering the academy is the first one; dying is the last.

Luckily, he is only concerned with the first one at the moment. He squeezes Akamaru slightly in anticipation. An irritated yip has him quickly apologize.

"Sorry, Akamaru. Just nervous, it's school, you know?"

He thinks about it some more.

"I mean, education? It's just not natural. Right, Akamaru?"

"Why are you talking to your dog?" Asks a high-pitch, irritating voice.

He turns and regards the girl standing behind him. Brown hair, grey eyes, smells mostly of lavender hygiene products, cotton, paper, and arrogance, no muscle definition, average height and skin color, dominating body language.

Civilian-born, annoying, will most likely wash out. Not worth the effort.

"Because I am." He says, already turning his back to her.

"Let's get to class, maybe someone interesting will be there!" Akamaru agrees with a tail wag.

"H-Hey!" She shouts as he leaves her fuming.

Even though he has five minutes to spare, class is filled up to the point he has to sit wherever is available.

Luckily there is an open space in the middle. He would have preferred the back, but it'll do just fine.

The girl to his left has pink hair that has been washed in a high quality cherry blossom shampoo and mostly smells of paper and anxiety. The boy to his right has black hair that hasn't been washed in a week, smells of chicken and excitement.

They're both civilian-born, he notes. Nothing about either of them is interesting, but something about the girl is off.

He pokes Akamaru and taps in her direction. Maybe the ninken can pick up something that he can't.

The teacher is not a second late. Kono-sensei, he introduces himself, and begins going over the reason they are there like they don't already know it.

In the middle of his "I am a ninja, the Hokage is a ninja, you will be a ninja, because ninjas are cool" speech, a loud and somewhat orange, blond-haired kid barrels into the room like his clothes are on fire.

To his amusement, the kid begins to rattle off his name, why he was late, "Are you gonna teach us how to be ninja? You don't look like much!" and just won't stop.

Kono-sensei has gone white, and the girl to his left inhales as if she can't get air.

He feels like something is wriggling inside his brain, but he just can't grab it.

Kono-sensei is now turning red, and he leans forward in his seat in anticipation.

School, he relishes, has just gotten more exciting.

...

Unlike the majority of his classmates, there is no one waiting to pick him up. Unlike Naruto, it isn't because he has no one to do so.

It's an Inuzuka rite of passage; you've got to figure out the way home yourself.

The blind-folded piggy-back ride wasn't just for kicks. Memorizing the things smelt, heard, and the movement of wind are very important for an Inuzuka.

The Inuzuka pride themselves on always being able to find home.

"Let's get to it, Akamaru!" He grins a fanged grin as his partner excitedly barks back.

The Inuzuka also prides themselves on never being alone.

He gets home before the sun sets and Ma and Sis are waiting with mocking words and gentle hair ruffles. He recounts everything and then some as dinner is being prepared. Akamaru adds in his own two cents.

He prefers this to being picked up, honestly.

Maybe he'll invite Naruto over some time.

...

It takes months before anything truly exciting happens. Oh, Naruto's

a blast, certainly, but it starts to become routine after a while.

He hasn't approached the loud mouth blond, mainly because Naruto doesn't want anyone to talk to him.

To his surprise, a few kids have tried to talk to Naruto, only to stomp off in a huff after having mean words and vague threats thrown at them.

The lonely look that winds up on the kid's face afterword makes him think there are more things going on than an attitude problem.

Nonetheless, it's an issue he isn't prepared to take on. He keeps his interactions to just passing the kid supplies when he needs it. (And if he gives him enough paint for a paint balloon, well)

Baby steps, he thinks.

But that's all part of the boring routine. Class is just not exciting enough. He does other things to occupy his time.

If things were taught in a more interesting manner, maybe he'd be more concerned about learning. As it is, Akamaru pays more attention than him, and all he needs is two nights a week of cramming and canine help to memorize and understand the information.

If he had been paying more attention to learning, he might have missed something far more interesting.

The girl next to him, Haruno Sakura, (Sakura Haruno?) is much more than she smells.

She smells of anxiousness, anger, excitement, and despair, all wrapped up in a pretty civilian image. He didn't think she could be more than that, butâ€¦

It happens when they are given their enemy ninja pictures.

For the past few days Kono-sensei has been going over the best spots to hit an enemy with kunai or shuriken.

Not that it's stated in such a blunt and forward way, but that's what it all really means.

The way Sakura gets more miserable as days go by is both confusing and intriguing; he watches her now, just like he watches Naruto. (He doesn't watch anyone else, they don't stand out yet)

When they are giving a cartoonish drawing of an over-the-top evil ninja, they have to mark all the spots needed to "stop" that ninja.

What they don't say is that these spots will either instantly kill the ninja, or disable them until they bleed to death.

He knows he's the only one that can understand this. Everyone else is far too young to know any better.

Or well, he thought he knew.

He's just placing down the second mark, when he hears Sakura inhale and turns to see her glaring down at her paper.

He flicks a glance at the front of the classroom, only to see Kono-sensei red-faced and looming over one Uzumaki Naruto who is mushing his face together and mocking the man. It takes talent, he thinks, to have a yelling match in silence.

He flicks his gaze back to Sakura who has started to mumble something, hands balling into fists.

"Oi," he whispers, "it's only a piece of paper. Don't get so mad."

He says it without thinking, but he now has green eyes boring into his with such an intensity, it unsettles him.

"Yes, for now. What about when we graduate? What about when it's real?" She hisses.

"Then you do what you gotta do." He says, "Ninja's kill, if you don't want to be a ninja, don't be a ninja."

She flinches, and goes back to staring at her paper in misery, like she has for the past few days.

"It's not that simple."

He doesn't understand, at first.

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't!" She snarls as quietly as she can.

"Then tell me why." He's interested now, he's not letting it go that easily.

"No."

"Yes."

"You wouldn't understand."

"I would. Probably."

"No you-I'm not having this conversation with a kid. Leave me alone." She tries to turn her back to him, but school seats don't work well for that.

His eyes sharpen as he examines her. He should be the one that thinks he's surrounded by children. Even Akamaru has picked up something and is staring at Sakura in curiosity.

"It's not like you have to be a ninja because a manga told you to."

It's said carelessly, but it's had more thought poured into it than anything else he has done so far.



It's when her head whips around, she stares at him with wide eyes, and begins smelling of shock, fear, and hope, that everything falls together.

"It's not like Kishimoto's words are absolute."

He adds when she doesn't say anything. This time it's a lot less vague, and it can't be simply brushed off. This, too, is done on purpose.

Her breath hitches, and she stutters.

"Y-you-"

"Time's up! Leave your papers there and get out. Not you, Uzumaki! Stay behind!" Kono-sensei barks from the front of the classroom.

"We'll talk more tomorrow." He tells her and gathers Akamaru in his arms.

He leaves her sitting there and practically bounces home.

...

Green eyes watch him warily.

"So." He says prodding.

It's lunch and they're sitting outside. The girl has been throwing him looks all morning. It'd be suspicious if the other girls weren't already doing the same to their crushes. It's somewhat unsettling to see girls so young acting in such a way, but different culture.

"You just wake up one morning as the new you?" He asks when she stays silent.

She blinks and shakily nods. She still doesn't say anything, but her scent of sorrow changes into something else he can't quite catch.

Akamaru barks at him to keep the chatter up, so he does. He tells her about his past life, and how he woke up one day when he was three.

He doesn't tell her everything he told Akamaru, of course. He's trying to establish a connection, but that doesn't mean he trusts her.

It takes two days of hounding her before she talks. The moment she opens her mouth it just spews.

"I had a fight with my mom, so I went and spent the night at my boyfriend's house. I woke up and everything was pink, and I was tiny. A woman I didn't know started yelling at me for being out of bed, and I just cried. I cried for weeks and my parents took me to the hospital, and they thought I was crazy, and it's all just wrong. And why me and why here of all places." She says in a rush, gasping for breath.

He stares at her. She looks like she's about to break down crying, and the last thing he wants is Kono-sensei blaming him for it.

So he hands Akamaru over for her to hold and gives her a hug. She looks so bewildered, that it takes everything he has to not laugh.

"Everything'll be fine." He tells her.

She takes a shuddering breath and hugs Akamaru tight. It's the first time anyone's told her that.

They don't become friends overnight, but Sakura's frame is less tense beside him during class.

She berates him for not paying attention, and he calms her down when she's about to explode from stress. Akamaru keeps them both in line.

Kono-sensei pretends not to hear their whispering when he figures out that both of their work is improving in leaps and bounds. It helps that Naruto is pretty much getting all of Kono-sensei's attention at the moment.

Sakura still doesn't like the fact that they are becoming killers and child soldiers for a society she still doesn't understand. He helps push her past these uncertainties when it comes to their schoolwork.

She's a long way from understanding the Will of Fire, but maybe he can help her understand in a different way.

"Oi, you're coming over for dinner tomorrow." He tells her.

"What?" She asks startled.

Then Naruto's fart bomb goes off.

...

The clan teases him about bringing a girl over, until she actually gets there. She's practically shaking with nervousness, a basket of fruit clutched in sweaty hands. The Inuzuka welcome her in with a polite civility they are not known for.

He knows better than to tease her at the moment but is confused why the clan is acting so well-behaved. It's incredibly unnerving.

It's when Sis is leading Sakura into the kitchen that Ma pulls him aside, and Kuromaru keeps an eye on the door.

"Hope you know what you're getting into, brat." She looks down at him gravely.

"Huh?" He squints up at her.

"The pink brat," she motions toward the kitchen with her head, "will either bring disaster or glory. I smell it."

He nods his understanding.

Sakura smells off, and he isn't surprised the other Inuzuka are having a hard time placing it. It took him a while to figure it out.

She smells like a spirit trapped in flesh.

It's a credit to his mother that she can somehow smell more than that, but he's not backing down from this.

Ma smirks and ruffles his hair. He wonders if she can read minds.

...

It all eventually comes to a head.

Uncle Taro, Aunt Shina, Cousin Toshiro, Sis, Ma, and their Ninken are quietly chewing through their dinner. Sakura is slowly relaxing beside him, and Akamaru is wiggling uncomfortably next to him.

Inuzuka dinners are not this quiet.

He, too, isn't saying anything because he doesn't want Sakura to realize how much his family doesn't want her here.

He's honestly a little bit angry at how rude they're being. Maybe Sakura is the next Orochimaru, maybe she's the next Tsunade. Despite everything, they cannot see the future.

Sakura is his friend, so that doesn't matter.

All it takes is a rude gesture from Cousin Toshiro.

When Sakura offers a small smile that Toshiro returns with bared teeth and narrow eyes, he flips.

His toenails are digging into the table before he's even aware he's moving, he rears back a fist and barely misses Toshiro.

"Kiba!" Sakura screams.

He's a bit too busy and pissed off to answer, as Toshiro has knocked the wind out of him with a kick. He digs his nails into his cousin's leg and tries to breathe.

Toshiro's ninken says something derogatory and Akamaru joins the fray with a growl.

They are too small and too weak to do anything more than scratches, but they are not about to take the insult lying down.

Ma and Kuromaru howl in synch and it takes the fight out of all of them.

He returns to his seat head bowed, but it is a pleasure to see Toshiro's head bowed too.

"Alright, maggots," Ma snarls, "eat your damn dinner and act like proper Inuzuka."

It is silent for a moment, and then-

"Should we take lessons from you, then? We might all end up like bitches." Aunt Shina says haughtily, but there is a teasing glint in her eye and her shoulders are down.

"Ha! If that's the case, prepare for heartache. You're all going to fall in love with me, because bitches are crazy for the Wild Taro." Boasts Uncle Taro.

"Wild Taro," Sis says mockingly, "Isn't that what your mom called you?"

"What the hell did you do?" Sakura hisses as she shakes him like a ragdoll.

"Moral obligation." He says as Uncle Taro bellows in the background.

The table shakes and a plate goes flying.

Dinner ends on a high note, but it takes many more before Sakura realizes that.

...

Silence and stillness for the Inuzuka means death.

Life is vibrant, violent, and movement. There is nothing more alive than a gathering of Inuzuka.

It takes nearly a year before Sakura is completely comfortable sitting at their table, and various clan members drift in and out. The only constants around the dinner table are Ma, Sis, and him.

...

Time moves forward, and Kono-sensei does not turn up one day.

When they are introduced to their new teachers Iruka-sensei and Mizuki-sensei, Sakura and he share a look.

A glance around the classroom shows that not all their previous classmates have kept up.

They will be working with practice weapons and doing more than just exercises.

Time is moving forward, and Sakura smells like fear.

"We could stop it."

He tears his eyes away from his manga and sees Sakura biting her lip. He lifts an eyebrow and watches her gaze land on one Uchiha Sasuke.

"We could." He agrees.

"But that might not be the right thing to do." She says miserably.

"Might not." He agrees again.

"But could we really just stand back and watch?" She asks, green eyes swirling with conflict.

"Could you?" He asks, because he already knows his own answer.

"Iâ€¦" She trails off.

He knows what she wants to be the truth and what the truth actually is are two different things.

"Yes, I could." She bows her head, hair covering her eyes.

He passes her his manga so she can pretend she's reading and not hiding her tears.

They look away when the day comes. The Inuzuka are one of Konoha's most valuable trackers, almost half the clan are sent out that night.

He holds Sakura's hand as she keeps a guilty gaze glued onto Sasuke's empty seat.

Akamaru is curled up in her lap, doing what he can.

He feels bad for not being able to do anything, but Sakura isâ€¦

He doesn't invite her over until the smell of grief goes away.

...

It happens when he's walking her home. She stops in the middle of the street and stares up at the sky, searching for something.

She does it often enough that he knows to just wait for her. He's in the middle of practicing enhancing his senses when she finally snaps out of it.

"I have to get stronger." She tells him, back straight and eyes hard.

The air is shifting, and he stops his chakra exercises to watch her with sharp eyes. The importance of this moment is not lost on Akamaru, who stays silent and alert.

"Why?" He asks.

"I can't fail." She says grimly.

"Why?" He asks again.

"Then I would die." Her hands shake until she clenches them into

fists.

"Why?" He asks a third time.

She cannot hide from him, and he won't let her hide from herself.

He will keep asking until she answers.

She takes a breath.

"I can't let what happened to the Uchiha, happen to your family or mine. I can't keep standing back and letting innocent people get hurt. I have to get stronger and protect them. I can't do that if I die." She says determination filling her voice.

He stares at her and wonders when she grew taller than him.

"Alright," he says finally, "let's head to my house then."

She follows as he turns around. Her parents are civilians, if she wants to grow stronger, she will have to go where the ninja are.

Akamaru is right by his side and lets him know they will grow stronger than any Inuzuka before him. Together they howl their resolve.

He is both surprised and not when Sakura joins in.

She finally gets it, and he is both proud and in awe of her.

...

Ma gives them her blessing, and various clan members swing by to teach them everything they wish to know.

Inuzuka work on a different learning system than other clans. The Inuzuka do not have the patience to teach a brat things they do not want to learn. Normally, a child trains enough to make them prideful and arrogant until a good ass-kicking sends them back begging.

He's learned more than the average clan child, but hasn't put in enough effort to be exceptional. Sakura is about to change all that.

He's not sure what it's about to do to his standing in the clan, but all eyes are on him, Akamaru, and Sakura.

They do chakra control exercises, slowly working their way up to tree climbing (not yet, but soon). They learn standard jutsu, then they are pushed to use them creatively. (They will never have to light a fire the normal way)

Sis teaches Sakura the basics to medical jutsu, while he and Akamaru work on their clan techniques.

The Four Legs Technique is frightening in how completely exhilarating it is and Ma has to knock him out many times.

Sakura gets in good practice now that Ma is training him more intensely.

Akamaru is able to use the Beast Human Clone in a relatively short amount of time, and they begin work on Fang Passing Fang. (Ma smacks him before telling him to first work on Passing Fang; he whines)

They are making good progress, and Sakura looks happier and more stable than before. She smells of pride and resolve.

All eyes are on them, but that is because the clan is behind them every step of the way.

...

There is a tapping on his window. He rolls over and pretends he can't hear it. Akamaru's nose is cold as it nudges him.

"Kiba." A fierce wind whispers.

Tap. Tap.

"Kiba." Says the wind, louder and angrier.

Akamaru gives him a sympathetic nibble and tells him to get up. He groans as he leaves his warm bed. He stumbles over the window, opens it, and squints at the face looking back at him.

"Finally!" Sakura huffs.

He stares at her for a moment before he turns around and grabs his coat off the dresser. Ignoring her squawk of "Don't ignore me!" he picks up a whining Akamaru and gently places the ninken on top of his head, hood pulled up and over like a blanket.

"Come on." He says to his visitor.

She moves out of his way and he takes a running leap.

He has no doubt every single one his relatives know that Sakura is in the compound, just as he knows they are watching from the shadows to see what happens. Nosy, he thinks irritably.

It is for that reason he leads Sakura out of clan grounds and into a nearby park. He has no doubt he's still being watched, Akamaru's soft bark confirms it, but they won't listen in.

Sakura has always smelt like she desperately needs to confide in someone, and she has chosen him like always, even if it is at an inconvenient time.

Inuzuka know how valuable trust and loyalty are.

They settle on a bench and he places Akamaru on his lap so he can lean back and see the stars.

Minutes go by and no one says anything. The silence is comfortable on his end, and he feels himself drifting off.

"How do you do it?" Sakura blurts out all of sudden.

"Do what?" He asks, jerking from his almost nap.

"How do you go on about just living, knowing what you do?" She asks in a soft voice, head bowed.

He thinks about it for a moment.

"I go on living." He finally says.

"That's not an answer!" She nearly yells, and he wonders why he got stuck with the crazy one.

"It is too," he looks at her, "but somehow I don't think that's what's bugging you."

"O-Of course it is! What else would be bothering me?" Her gaze is averted and she's playing with the ends of her dress.

He lets out a sigh and spells it out for her.

"You're scared. You don't want to be on Team 7. You don't want to get hurt. You don't want to be responsible if things do or don't go according to the manga. You feel pulled in many directions and feel uncomfortable in your own skin. Am I on base?"

She looks like her world has been turned upside, but he has news for her: it's already been that way since the day she woke up.

"Right, so here's the thing. You are Sakura, but you are not Sakura. You can't do what she did, you don't even know what all she did. Maybe you didn't do something as simple as purchase something at a certain time and got someone killed. Maybe you did, you'll never know."

He takes a breath and keeps going.

"There's nothing you can do but be yourself and do your best going forward. Maybe you'll change everything for the better, for the worse, or not at all. Whatever happens, happens. Just live your life with no regrets."

It feels awkward to say so much at a time, but she needs to hear it. He doesn't know if she understands what he is trying to say, but she's gone silent and has her thinking face on.

So he waits.

The night is beautiful, and stargazing is not something he does often. He likes his sleep and the only time he's outside at night is for training.

He feels his eyes closing when Sakura begins to stir.

"Is that what you do? Live with no regrets?" She asks quietly, still thinking.

"Well, yeah. I mean, I regret accidentally stabbing Cousin Toshiro with chopsticks at dinner, I'm not perfect, but it's working well so far."



He tells her.

"There'sâ€|nothing I can do but go forward, living the life I want to live, right?" She looks at him now, eyes boring into his with a fragile intensity. She smells faintly of hope.

"Yep, but we're here too. We'll go forward together." He promises. Akamaru barks his agreement, and he knows in that moment Sakura will never need to feel alone again.

He doesn't think she realizes just what he and Akamaru have done, but she drapes herself over his arm and gently pets the top of Akamaru's head.

"Stay with me for a little while longer?" She asks, no longer smelling of a violent wind of emotions.

He offers her a tired grin, "Yeah."

She smiles and they watch the stars for an hour before parting ways.

He goes back to sleep dreaming of a future that doesn't have Sakura alone and crying.

...

The second momentous event in a shinobi's life comes to pass.

It's graduation. They wear the headbands with pride and run home to their families. Naruto has disappeared, but he knows he'll see the blond kid tomorrow.

He's walking beside Sakura on the way to her house; Akamaru is in her arms today. She smells of exhilaration, excitement, fear, and anxiety.

"Do you think we did okay?" She asks, biting her lip.

He knows she's not asking about the exam. He thinks of everything they've learned in and out of the classroom. He thinks of the missed opportunities they've had to forge connections. He remembers all that they've managed to accomplish so far.

"Yeah," he says, "we did good."

Akamaru barks his agreement.

Sakura smiles wide and looks to the sky, but unlike usual, doesn't seem to be searching for something.

She hums a tune that sounds vaguely familiar, and he brushes her shoulder with his.

Green eyes meet his and she says,

"Together?"

He grins.

"Together."

## 2. Through Her Eyes 1

She opens her eyes and freezes in horror.

This is not her boyfriend's room.

This is not his bed, and he's not lying next to her.

Everything is pink.

Panic rises in her, and she stumbles out of bed, legs tangled up in the comforter.

Tiny legs, she soon realizes.

Everything feels wrong, fingers too stiff, and she can barely keep her balance.

Someone's changed her into a pair of pink pajamas.

Why pink, she thinks hysterically.

There is a full-length mirror in the bedroom.

She makes the mistake of glancing at it.

She screams.

...

A woman yells at her for screaming and being out of bed.

She doesn't-

She doesn't understand.

What?

She can feel herself breaking into pieces.

Why is she here instead of at her boyfriend's house?

Why is she so small?

Why is there a woman screaming at her?

Why is there a tiny Sakura Haruno staring back at her in the mirror.

Why is everything pink?

...

She can't help it; she cries.

She doesn't stop crying even when they take her to the hospital for it.

She can't stop crying because this is wrong.

Because they're wrong.

She's not Sakura. She's not, she's not, \_she's not\_.

She has a name.

She cries some more when she realizes she can't even pronounce it correctly in this new language.

...

These two people who call themselves her parents-

Well, maybe they are.

When someone says "Mom" or "Dad", she thinks, "Yeah, those."

She barely has a relationship with the woman who birthed her. The man who was supposed to be her father shows up every once in a while.

The greatest thing they've ever done for her was buy a box of Naruto manga for her birthday one year.

That was the last year they bothered.

Parents? What are those supposed to be?

These two apparently.

She's dried her tears, and they think she's had an emotional breakdown from watching ninjas train.

It's bizarre how they came up with that one.

Still, even though she's refusing to speak this awful new language (she hates it, \_hates\_ it), they never stop trying to get her to talk or stop feeding her.

They never stop trying to police her clothes or stop reading to her.

They never stop loving her any less.

If a tiny part of her wants to call them her parents, to wipe away the stain of her old ones, well, why not?

She might be here a while.

...

She begins speaking, and her parents breathe a sigh of relief.

She firmly squashes down the guilt by reminding herself why she stopped in the first place.

She was hoping to wake up by now.

This crazy, horrible dream, the dream of being Sakura Haruno. (Haruno Sakura, actually)

It turns into a nightmare when she realizes she'll have to go to the academy.

Just until the real Sakura returns, she tells herself.

She tries to believe it too.

...

Her parents aren't convinced, not after her meltdown from watching ninjas.

It's terrible because she doesn't want to go, they don't want her to go, and she still has to convince them to go.

She manages it, barely.

It involved a lot of pep talk in front of the mirror and fake smiles.

...

Her parents drop her off, and it takes everything she has not to beg them to take her with them.

She arrives early, and finds a seat in the middle away from everyone.

Away from all the tiny children who are spouting about how awesome it'll be to be a ninja.

She barely keeps herself from crying.

...

She sees them. The ones who will one day be-

They pick seats away from her, and she averts her eyes.

She doesn't see Nar-

No, no, no.

She doesn't care. She doesn't care because Sakura will eventually return, and she'll look down her nose at the class clown who always asks her out-

Her breath hitches.

No crying, she tells herself.

When Sakura gets back, she can deal with it herself.

...

It takes everything she has not to stare.

There is a boy with a dog. He's sitting right next to her.

He has red marks on his face, and he is tiny.

Inuzuka Kiba is sitting next to her.

Why, why, why.

He's already fidgeting in his seat, tapping on the desk, and she knows this is going to be a long day.

...

She goes on by pretending he doesn't exist.

She pretends she doesn't realize that she's here to learn to be a murderer.

She tells herself she'll have her life back the way she left it.

Sakura will be back to be her fangirl self, eventually.

When the girl returns, she'll get to go home.

She'll get her name back too. She has to.

...

Her self-made reality starts breaking when they have to actually start showing progress.

She stares down at the cartoon ninja, who stares back with evil, red eyes.

She's learning how to kill.

This is wrong, she's not even six yet.

She's memorizing the best spots to kill a person, and she's only \_five\_.

When she graduates, she'll still be a child.

She'll be a child who kills, who's known the best spots to kill a person since she was five.

"Oi," the boy next to her whispers, "it's only a piece of paper. Don't get so mad."

Only? \_Only\_ a piece of paper?

What about when it's not?

"Yes, for now. What about when we graduate? What about when it's real?" She hisses to him.

"Then you do what you gotta do. Ninja's kill, if you don't want to be a ninja, don't be a ninja." He tells her, face completely

serious.

She feels like she's been slapped.

What? She doesn't-

She looks at her paper to avoid looking at the boy with strange, wild eyes.

How can he say that?

"It's not that simple."

He doesn't understand; he can't understand. Sakura's supposed to be a ninja.

She has to be.

"Why not?" He asks her.

"Because it isn't!" She snarls as quietly as she can.

"Then tell me why." The boy demands.

"No."

"Yes."

"You wouldn't understand."

She's not even sure she understands.

This boy couldn't hope to even try.

"I would. Probably."

"No you-I'm not having this conversation with a kid. Leave me alone."

She shouldn't have said anything to begin with.

This boy's eyes unnerve her, and his dog (Akamaru, her traitorous mind reminds her) stares at her too.

So, she tries to turn her back to him, to keep those eyes off of her.

Turns out school seats don't work well for that.

"It's not like you have to be a ninja because a manga told you to."

She whips her head around, and she stares at him before she even truly comprehends his words.

\_Because a manga told you to\_

No, it couldn't be-

But what if?

\_Because a manga told you to\_

He couldn't possibly-

"It's not like Kishimoto's words are absolute."

She feels like the she's falling.

Her reality is shattering behind her.

Sakura, Sakura will be back. She'll-

Wild eyes, stare into her soul, \_knowing\_.

She doesn't know what to say, what to do.

"Y-you-"

"Time's up! Leave your papers there and get out. Not you, Uzumaki! Stay behind!" Their teacher shouts.

She feels her words die in her mouth.

She doesn't know what to say.

"We'll talk more tomorrow." He tells her before running off with his dog in his arms.

She's left thinking, what?

She just doesn't know.

...

She comes home late.

The teacher had to physically throw her out of the classroom.

She spends the rest of the day in a daze.

Her parents ask her what's wrong, and all she can say is,

"I met a boy."

They back off with knowing looks and secret smiles.

She wants to cry.

...

She goes to school with a heavy stomach and beating heart.

She thinks she's going to throw up.

The boy gets there almost late and never once acknowledges her.

Does he?

Is he?

What about?

Did it even happen?

She can't think, and she's definitely not paying attention to the lecture.

...

He grabs her and forces her outside the moment lunch break starts.

"So." He says.

So? So what?

So the sky is blue, school still sucks, and \_she's in a manga\_.

"You just wake up one morning as the new you?"

Wake up?

Did she or is she still dreaming?

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

It's shaky, but she nods.

Oh, is it shaky.

His dog barks at him, and she has the unpleasant reminder that it (Akamaru) can understand everything being said.

She panics for a moment, but he opens his mouth and begins to talk.

"I lived by myself," he tells her, "and my favorite manga was a series called, "Naruto.""

It's almost like siren's song.

She can't speak. She can't help but listen.

His eyes, so wild, never leave her.

...

She's not alone.

She's dreaming; this isn't real.

She's not \_alone\_.

Sakura will be back; she's going to wake up soon.

\_She's not alone anymore.\_

It's real; it's all real.



She is Haruno Sakura, but she doesn't want to be.

She is Sakura, and someone else knows she's not.

...

Her parents are panicking.

They think she's having a relapse.

They try to keep her from going back to the academy, and she kicks them in retaliation.

It takes two days before sound returns to her voice.

She uses it to apologize.

These are her parents now; Sakura won't be back because she's already here.

...

She doesn't know how to stop the panic now.

She'll be the one being a ninja. She'll be the one who has to kill.

She'll be the one fighting for her life. She'll be the one on Team 7.

Kiba tells her, "Everything'll be fine."

She grabs it like a lifeline.

She has a new mantra to keep her going.

...

It's aggravating; he's aggravating.

He can't sit still and has the attention span of a gnat.

Akamaru's taking his notes for him!

He smells, and he likes annoying her.

He won't quit bothering her during class, and she doesn't even have time to be depressed.

He's wonderful.

...

She takes it back.

He's somehow roped her into going to his house for dinner.

She likes Akamaru well enough, but even she's heard the stories.

The wild Inuzukas: ready to knock back, knock out, or knock

up.

Sometimes all three at once, she's heard.

Her being nervous is an understatement.

...

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Her mom asks.

"Um, uh," she's not sure how to put this, "I'm going to a friend's house for dinner tomorrow?"

It comes out more of a question, but her mother seems to light up in delight.

"You have a friend? Is she pretty or ugly? Do you need things for matching bracelets?"

Oh, um.

She tries to smile, but all that comes out is a grimace.

How to put this gently?

"He's a boy. He's not really pretty, but I wouldn't call him ugly either. I don't think he's interested in bracelets, and we're just friends." She says brightly.

Her mother stares at her.

She pokes her when she doesn't say anything.

The name Inuzuka is definitely not being brought up.

...

She's nervous, and her mother's forced a basket of fruit on her.

Kiba's big sister, Hana, gives her a gentle smile, and she thinks maybe this won't be so bad.

It's intimidating; the place smells of dogs, it's crawling with people and ninken, it's incredibly noisy, and it's huge.

But the moment they see her, the Inuzuka become the very model of decorum; she's impressed actually.

She doesn't see anything wild and uncivilized about them.

Guess there was nothing to those rumors after all.

...

Kiba ruins it of course.

They were having a nice, quiet meal, and he has to jump on the table to hit someone.

Of course he does.

She doesn't even know what caused him to flip out.

A plate goes flying, scuffles are breaking out, and dinner's been ruined.

...

It takes her a while to figure it out.

Kiba keeps forcing her back, and she has to get used to the idea of always being surrounded by strangers.

(They aren't strangers, not really)

She gets used to loud, violent dinners and warm love.

...

They're no longer speaking to her in courteous tones; they no longer show her a calm, collected face.

The Inuzuka being polite? Fake.

That fake politeness? Yeah, they were just being rude.

The Inuzuka really are wild.

They're just not uncivilized.

They're different certainly, but that doesn't mean they're lesser for it.

Inuzuka believe in loyalty, strength, pack, and freedom.

She thinks she understands.

...

"You're coming over for dinner tomorrow," she tells him, "Mom and Dad want to meet you."

He grins back and says, "Sure."

He doesn't need to tell her he's bringing Akamaru; it's a given.

She thinks she's freaking out.

She kind of wishes he would freak out with her, but he's never been the type.

It's probably for the best; only one of them needs to be sane.

And Kiba? He's too crazy to be sane.

...

"So, your Sakura's," her mom hesitates, "friend."

Her dad is giving Kiba a hard, sizing look.

She knows they see his puppy; they see his red marks, wild hair, and eyes that scream Inuzuka.

Oh, and he's a boy. There's that too.

She wants to melt through the floor.

He gives her an amused look, like he knows exactly what she's thinking.

He probably does.

He gives her parents a positively angelic smile and holds up Akamaru.

The ninken's holding a small sunflower, and she wants to know how he was hiding that.

Seriously, how did she not notice?

"Akamaru thought you might like a flower. He saw some on the way here and thought of you." Kiba says tilting his head just so.

Her mom positively melts into goo.

Um, what?

...

Dinner's served, and they're all sitting at the kitchen table.

She still kind of wants to run away.

Dad keeps giving Mom disapproving looks when he's not glaring at Kiba.

Kiba's still pretending he's an angel.

Mom is currently cooing over Akamaru in her lap.

Akamaru is playing up his puppy cuteness as much as possible.

She wonders if Kiba bribed him.

"So," her dad asks grumpily, "how did you meet Sakura?"

"We sit next to each other in class." He says.

She's relieved because that's reasonable. People sitting next to each other and becoming friends is reasonable.

Then she's reminded this is Kiba because he doesn't stop.

"She wouldn't stop looking at me one day, and we became friends." He says far too brightly.

"I think everyone thinks she has a crush on me." He adds as an afterthought.

She doesn't even stop herself from sinking in her chair.

Melt, melt, she thinks.

Mom and Dad are giving her the look she knows too well; the one that says, "What's wrong with you?"

Kiba gives her a smirk before clearing the air,

"She was just curious about me. I'm the only one with a ninken in class. She wasn't sure how to ask." He says, wiping away the smirk before her parents could see it.

Nothing he says was a lie, but there's plenty of omission in that sentence.

He's gone back to looking angelic.

Demon, she thinks.

She's not sure how, but he manages to talk her father around.

Something about not having one of his own; it leaves her dad teary-eyed, whatever it is.

Her parents are reluctant to see Kiba and Akamaru leave; she almost has to pry them off.

They want to know when he's coming back, and what his favorite foods are.

Demon, she thinks.

...

They have two new teachers: Iruka-sensei and Mizuki-sensei.

Mizuki, who will end up a traitor, and Iruka, who will be Nar-

She stops that thought cold.

She can't even think his name.

Everything'll be fine, she tells herself.

That familiar feeling of fear sits in her chest, and she tells herself, \_everything'll be fine.\_

One day she'll even believe it.

...

She used to avoid looking at them.

Those characters who would grow up to be the Rookie 9.

It takes her all this time to realize they're not characters; they're children.

They're children. They're her future teammates and comrades.

She knows the story; she knows what's coming.

How can she just let a child go through that?

If someone did that to her parents and made her see it over and over againâ€¦

If one of the Inuzuka decided to wipe out their whole clan, and only Kiba was leftâ€¦

(He'd kill himself if Akamaru was taken from him)

Why does she have to go through this? What did she do wrong?

Why is she so useless?

...

She wants to say something, tell someone. Why does Sasuke have to suffer so much?

She could change it if she tried!

But that wouldn't stop the Uchiha from launching their coup.

Can she really just look away?

Kiba's knowing eyes cut into her, and she feels disgust.

She knows she can.

It hurts so much.

It hurts to be so disgusting.

...

The Uchiha are no more.

Kiba holds her hand, and Akamaru curls up into her lap.

It's not enough, but it's better than nothing.

She doesn't think he realizes how much this signifies.

How much this means to her.

Because while she sees Sasuke, she also sees herself and Kiba.

She sees what being part of Konoha actually means.

And she loves both her parents and the Inuzuka too much to let it go.

...

Kiba's walking her home when it hits her.

She stops.

Her thoughts are heavy, and the only thing she can think about is, what if.

What if she's called on to kill her family? What if she's the one left behind?

What if it ever happens to Kiba?

What if she gives up? What if she fails?

It feels like something is growing; she doesn't know what.

She doesn't know what she's doing, but there is one thing she does know.

She tears her eyes away from the sky and looks at Kiba.

"I have to get stronger." She tells him.

"Why?" He asks with sharp eyes.

What if, what if.

"I can't fail." She says grimly.

"Why?" He asks again.

If she fails then-

"Then I would die." Her hands shake until she clenches them into fists.

"Why?" He asks a third time.

He's watching her with his knowing eyes, and she feels like he can see into her very soul.

He won't stop asking until she actually says what she wants to say.

She takes a breath.

"I can't let what happened to the Uchiha, happen to your family or mine. I can't keep standing back and letting innocent people get hurt. I have to get stronger and protect them. I can't do that if I die." She says.

Truth, this is truth, she thinks.

She feels like she's finally waking up.

He stares at her, and she wonders what he sees.

"Alright," he says finally, "let's head to my house then."

She doesn't know what he's thinking, but she'll follow him anyways.

...

"You want what?" Tsume asks flatly.

"The clan to train us." Kiba repeats.

They're staring each other down, and she can't help but think,

Kiba, you moron.

She's pretty sure she isn't an Inuzuka, and she's also pretty sure Inuzuka Tsume is completely terrifying.

Kiba's either the world's bravest idiot, or the world's most stupid martyr.

She's not sure which.

Tsume bares her fangs, and Kiba mimics her.

Stupid martyr, she thinks.

Apparently, her knowledge of Inuzuka language is spotty because the only thing Tsume does is throw her head back and laugh.

"Alright, brat, alright.

Wait, what?

...

"Oi, pink brat, follow me. Brat, stay." Tsume says while walking away, Kuromaru following.

She follows, but if she feels a bit hesitant, well.

It's Inuzuka Tsume, enough said.

The clan head leads her to a traditional-styled room, and gestures her to sit.

She folds her legs and tries not stare at Kuromaru.

She's never realized how big the ninken actually is until she's sitting directly across from him.

Tsume takes a seat and stares her down.

She can feel her mouth drying.

Is Tsume going to kill her?

Make her battle for the right to learn from the Inuzuka?

"Well," Tsume says, breaking her thoughts, "we knew this day would come."

She blinks.



Huh?

Tsume bares a fanged grin.

"The brat has all but claimed you. You're Inuzuka whether you want to be or not."

\_What?\_

"Hana's got dibs on you, says she doesn't trust anyone else with her future sister."

Um, ah.

Sakura's not here right now, come back later.

Tsume throws her head back and laughs. Kuromaru rolls his one eye at her.

"Relax," Tsume says with her grin, "claiming ain't the same as marriage. The clan's just getting their hopes up."

Well, just so it's clear then.

She thinks she manages a squeak.

"I'm told you have excellent chakra control, we've got a few things in mind for you, but you're gonna have to swear our oath before you start." Tsume tells her.

Swear an oath? Officially become Inuzuka?

"Um," she interrupts hesitantly, "if you don't mind me asking, why...?"

"Why are we letting in some random brat with no ninken?" Tsume guesses.

Not how she'd put it, butâ€¦

She nods.

"Because," Tsume says looking her straight in the eye, "our future has decided you're part of it whether we like it or not. Either we go down in a blaze or rise up in glory."

She's not sure what the clan head's telling her, but it doesn't stop the chill from seeping in.

She feels disquieted.

She swears her oath and is welcomed into her new family.

...

Hana's awesome. She fully understands why Kiba raves on about his sister.

Every time she thinks, I can't do this, Hana is there to tell her, yes, she can.

If it involves a bit of smacking, well that's just par the course.

The older girl works her to the bone, and she feels like she's getting stronger, bit by bit.

Hana distracts her from all those wild, unnerving eyes, and she puts her soul in learning.

(Those eyes have nothing on Kiba's)

...

She's correct in her initial assessment: Inuzuka Tsume is terrifying.

She's not sure what it says about her friend who's able to get back up and keep going.

Her own training's nothing to laugh at, but his is just downright brutal.

Tsume launches Kiba through a tree, and she grabs her medical supplies.

There's no way he's not going to feel that one.

...

The Inuzuka train her in more than just medical jutsu.

She doesn't have a ninken, but they've got that figured out.

They teach her how to shred a person to pieces, and she wonders if she needs to get red tattoos.

Eh, maybe not, her parents would kill her.

...

She doesn't allow herself to stop.

She doesn't stop learning. She doesn't stop healing. She doesn't stop moving.

She doesn't allow herself to think the name Nar-.

...

It happens when she's in bed sleeping.

Well, trying to because her thoughts just can't leave her alone.

The future, the words rattle around in her brain, what about the future.

She's Sakura, but she isn't.

She's had extensive training; the only looks she gives Sasuke are

ones filled with guilt.

She's never been asked out by Nar-

By him.

She doesn't know what she's doing.

She knows what's coming up, and she knows what she needs to do.

She doesn't think she's strong enough to sit back and watch.

...

It gets to her.

Not even listening to her parents' breathing helps.

Kiba, she thinks, Kiba will know what to do.

It's really late, he's undoubtedly sleeping.

It'd be awfully rude of her to just march into the compound this late at night.

But she's an Inuzuka! And they were rude first, so there.

Stillâ€¦

No, she needs to talk to him. She feels like something's stretching her, pulling her apart.

Kiba will help her; he always does.

...

She sees Kiba's bizarre house, half traditional and half Western. (Constant reconstruction and changing tastes, he tells her)

She sees his window on the second floor and doesn't hesitate to climb up with chakra-soled feet.

She ignores the eyes watching her every movement.

She taps on his window.

...

He doesn't even complain when she wakes him up, or when his bare feet hit the dirt.

He just gives her a sleepy stare, Akamaru hidden under his jacket hood.

She wonders what she did to deserve such a friend.

He motions to her and leads her to a nearby park

They settle on a bench and he places Akamaru in his lap so he can

lean back to stare at the sky.

She's trying to find the words she wants to say; she ends up staring at her knees.

She doesn't know what she's doing. She doesn't know what to say.

The future, it echoes, what about the future.

"How do you do it?" She blurts out.

She doesn't know what she's doing.

"Do what?" He asks, flinching.

She thinks he may have been falling asleep.

The future, the future, the future, she thinks.

"How do you go on about just living, knowing what you do?" She asks still staring at her knees.

He's quiet for a moment, and she can hear the word, future, echoing around them.

"I go on living." He finally says.

It's actually a very Kiba thing to say, but that's not what she wants to hear.

"That's not an answer!" She nearly yells.

It really isn't.

"It is too," he looks at her, "but somehow I don't think that's what's bugging you."

"O-Of course it is! What else would be bothering me?" She says playing with the ends of her dress.

\_Future.\_

He lets out a sigh and reminds her why she came.

"You're scared. You don't want to be on Team 7. You don't want to get hurt. You don't want to be responsible if things do or don't go according to the manga. You feel pulled in many directions and feel uncomfortable in your own skin. Am I on base?"

She has to remind herself to keep breathing. He knows, of course he knows.

He always knows.

"Right, so here's the thing. You are Sakura, but you are not Sakura. You can't do what she did, you don't even know what all she did. Maybe you didn't do something as simple as purchase something at a certain time and got someone killed. Maybe you did, you'll never know."

His eyes seem to bore into hers, those wild, knowing eyes.

"There's nothing you can do but be yourself and do your best going forward. Maybe you'll change everything for the better, for the worse, or not at all. Whatever happens, happens. Just live your life with no regrets."

Whatever happens, happens?

Que sera, sera, she remembers someone saying once upon a time.

But, he's right.

If she thinks about it.

She's not the same; if she was trying to follow the manga to the letter, she's already failed.

Do your best going forwards? Live with no regrets.

\_Everything'll be fine\_, she remembers.

"Is that what you do? Live with no regrets?" She asks quietly.

Can she do it, is it possible?

"Well, yeah. I mean, I regret accidentally stabbing Cousin Toshiro with chopsticks at dinner, I'm not perfect, but it's working well so far." He tells her.

"There'sâ€|nothing I can do but go forward, living the life I want to live, right?"

Maybe she can do it, she thinks.

Living her own life instead of Sakura's, it soundsâ€|good.

"Yep, but we're here too. We'll go forward together." He promises. Akamaru barks his agreement.

She's not alone; she wonders when she forgot.

Moving forward together, she likes the sound of it.

Even if she falls off the edge of the world, he'll be there either to pull her back up or fall down with her.

Akamaru will be there too, but that's a given.

A deep affection wells in her, and she drapes herself over his arm to pet the top of Akamaru's head.

"Stay with me for a little while longer?" She asks.

He offers her a tired grin, "Yeah."

She smiles and they watch the stars for an hour before parting ways.

She goes to sleep dreaming of a future that is her own.

...

It's graduation. She's decided that she wants to wear her headband like a ribbon, because she wants to.

Kiba's changed things up and is wearing his on the arm of his new jacket.

With no regrets, she thinks.

He's walking beside her. She holds Akamaru in her arms, the other part of his soul.

It's an amazing trust he has in her.

"Do you think we did okay?" She asks, biting her lip.

Did they train enough, or did they do too much? Should she haveâ€|?

"Yeah," he says, "we did good."

Akamaru barks his agreement.

Everything'll be fine.

Sakura looks at the sky, and it's like she can see it again.

Was the sky always so blue?

Naruto's eyes are that blue, she thinks.

A tune from long ago echoes in head, and she can't help humming.

She feels a shoulder brushing against her, and she looks into wild, knowing eyes.

She says,

"Together?"

He grins.

"Together."

### 3. With Our Comrades 1

Sakura is sitting next to him, petting Akamaru like the world is ending. He's pretty sure that's an exaggeration on her part.

Today is the day they get their teams. (Comrades unto death)

They've already gotten their pictures taken and are waiting for Iruka-sensei. They're also waiting for Naruto, but the three of them are the only ones who know that.

He's excited. Sakura is too, if her scent is anything to go by.

Akamaru is feeling rather melancholy and allows Sakura all the cuddles she desires.

This will be the last time they can freely hang out together. After today, their attention will be focused almost solely on their own teams.

While the thought stings a little, he knows that even apart they will be moving forward together.

He knows because even though Sakura is riddled with fear and anxiety, she's also filled with determination and courage.

Sakura has made a promise to herself, to her family, and to the Inuzuka.

A certain loudmouth barrels into the room, Konoha headband proudly resting where goggles used to be.

The blond doesn't even have to open his mouth for the room to be in an uproar.

Naruto, he thinks, is very good at getting attention even when he's not trying.

Sakura watches her future teammate with intense eyes, judging and hopeful. He watches too because it's too interesting not to.

Life no longer follows the same scenes as the pages of a manga; they've already changed so much by simply being themselves.

Ino doesn't know who Sakura is, never having been needed. Naruto only knows him as his prank supplier; they've never skipped class together because Sakura won't let him.

Sakura has been accepted as an Honorary Inuzuka. He no longer takes anyone at face value.

More importantly, Sakura does not have a crush on Sasuke, and Naruto does not have a crush on Sakura.

Team 7's dynamics are going to be something new and interesting; he can feel it.

Naruto puffs himself up and taps on his headband as he loudly declares himself a ninja. He receives jeers in response.

For a moment Naruto falters before pumping his fist and declaring that he will be the best ninja of them all. When someone scoffs, Naruto jumps on top of the desk in front of him and shouts he will be Hokage.

They believe him, but the rest of the class mocks him in response.

It's not exactly their fault that they can't see Naruto's worth. The blond has continuously skipped classes, thrown balloons instead of knives, talked big without backing it up, and couldn't master a single jutsu.

They're all in for a shock, that's for sure.

Sakura doesn't realize it, but she is smiling.

Then the door opens, and everyone holds their breath.

...

Iruka-sensei is standing before them, pride in his students practically radiating from him. Mizuki-sensei is nowhere to be seen.

He won't miss the teacher who smelt of deceit and jealousy, but Iruka-sensei will be a sorely missed part of his day.

The time comes, and he begins calling out the teams.

Sakura is taking deep breaths beside him, and he has to reign in the impulse to hold her hand. He doesn't care what others say, but she's asked him to hold off on the touching.

It's not going to stop everyone from thinking they're going to marry each other, but he humors her.

"Next is Team 7," Iruka-sensei says, "Haruno Sakura, Uzumaki Naruto, and Uchiha Sasuke."

Sakura closes her eyes and stops breathing. The weight of destiny is heavy.

"Ugh! Iruka-sensei, why the hell to do I have to be on the same team as this bastard?" Naruto shouts, hands already going into the air.

While Iruka-sensei is busy with Naruto, he flicks Sakura on the forehead.

She flinches and growls. The glare she's giving him is almost as impressive as his mother's. Akamaru decides to take cover under the desk.

Wordlessly, he motions to Naruto with his head. She knows what she needs to do.

Grimacing, she reaches down to pet Akamaru one last time. She stands up, flicks him on the forehead in retaliation, and leaves.

She doesn't look back, and he doesn't expect her to.

"Team 8," Iruka-sensei finally continues, "Hyuuga Hinata, Inuzuka Kiba, and Aburame Shino."

Her destiny awaits her, but so does his.

...

Hinata and Shino are-



Well, they're quiet, eerily so.

They've gathered at Hinata's desk. Hinata is picking at her jacket sleeve, and Shino is staring at the wall. He, himself, is pulling a Sakura and is staring at the ceiling. Akamaru is watching the pink-haired girl like the sad, little puppy he is.

None of them are looking at each other.

This isn't going to work. Something's going to have to give.

It does, just not in the way he expects it to.

It's only been a few minutes, but Akamaru is on his feet, urging him to look at Sakura.

He whips his head away from the ceiling so abruptly it catches his teammates by surprise.

His eyes are not on them though; it's on Sakura who is all alone and looking down at her hands.

They've barely begun, and already they've abandoned her.

Hot, burning anger courses through him. A silent snarl pulls at his lips, and he knows he's going to drag those two idiots back even if he has to kill them.

His body language conveys everything to Akamaru. They take off, leaving Shino and Hinata to stare at his back uncomprehendingly.

He's going to teach those two exactly what it means to leave their teammate behind-

He stops mid stride as he realizes, he too, is about to leave his teammates behind. Akamaru questions him.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Anger does not help others. He's livid, but that doesn't mean he can't think rationally.

"New plan." He tells Akamaru.

"Oi, Shino, Hinata, come with me." He yells over his shoulder.

Murder is best enjoyed as a team.

...

"Kiba, where are you taking me?" Sakura hisses at him.

He's dragging her by the arm, Akamaru is leading, and Shino and Hinata are reluctantly following behind. They probably make for an odd picture. He doesn't care.

Sakura is scowling at him, but isn't trying to get out of his grip. It's a deep trust placed in him; he hopes to repay it in short order.

Akamaru navigates them through the school to the roof, and he smells Naruto long before he sees him.

The blond is sitting on the other side of the fence, sulking. He hears Hinata let out a squeak behind him. It takes everything he has not to dash forward and push the blond off.

No need to ruin three valuable relationships in one go.

"Oi!" He hollers instead.

The blond yelps and tumbles off. Naruto catches himself at the last minute, and Sakura is there, hauling him back up to the roof. Hinata makes a quiet dying sound behind him. It's almost satisfying.

"Kiba!" Sakura scolds, but he can smell the mirth she's trying to hide.

"What the hell was that for?" Naruto yells at him once he's regain his balance.

He regards the blond seriously. His anger has already died out. He doesn't feel like he overreacted, but he knows the blond doesn't even realize his offense.

"Do you know what being teammates mean?" He decides to ask.

"Eh?" Naruto squints at him like he doesn't understand.

He probably won't for a while, but he can at least point the blond in the right direction.

"Teammates don't abandon each other. They help each other and build each other up. Teammates are there for you no matter what. Stop ignoring her." He says, making sure it's said clearly with just the right emphasis.

He wants Naruto to remember these words. He's entrusting his precious person into someone else's hands.

He does not want to be disappointed again.

"Oi, let's go get lunch." He tells Hinata and Shino, who are still with him.

He jumps off the roof, Akamaru following him.

Shino and Hinata follow too.

...

They're still silent, but they're no longer avoiding each other.

Progress, he thinks as he finishes off his skewered chicken.

They still have about two and half hours left before their sensei shows up, which means he has that much time left to work on forging

Team 8's bonds.

He's not quite sure what to do. Food was about the only thing he could think of.

Luckily, Akamaru is there to lend a helping paw.

"Akamaru wants some dessert, you guys interested?"

...

They make it back to the classroom with only a few minutes to spare. Team 8 unanimously agrees that the fault lies with sheer bad luck.

Somehow Akamaru wanting dessert led to a bizarre series of events that took them all across the merchant district.

He maintains, to a giggling Hinata and unsuccessfully stoic Shino, that the pastry man had it coming.

His teammates are a little more relaxed, Akamaru is happily stuffed, and they have completed their first D-rank entirely by accident. It's worth the lifetime banishment.

Probably.

He takes a seat next to his teammates and looks for the familiar pink hair. Sakura catches his eye and beams at him from across the room. Sasuke is sitting away from them, but Naruto is next to her ranting about something, hands moving in excitement.

She is happy, and he is pleased.

Then the door opens.

...

"So I heard you've had quite the afternoon adventure." Kurenai-sensei says amusement lacing her voice.

The three of them look at each other, daring one of them to answer her. Akamaru, the lucky dog, can't speak their language yet and gets a pass.

He loses when Hinata gives him the injured puppy look, and Shino gives him the "I'll-die-before-I-do-it" stare.

He has a terrible feeling that he's going to be seeing these looks often in the near future.

"It wasn't our fault." He calmly states, "Akamaru just wanted some dessert, but when we got to the shop, they said they don't serve dogs. I was going to leave, but then Akamaru smelled something weird, soâ€¦"

...

Shino and Hinata are from a different world. He doesn't mean their skills are terrible. (They can catch up, he knows it)

For them, silence and stillness is a part of life. Their clans value different things. Their bodies speak a different language with different meanings.

They \_smell \_different.

It makes him grit his teeth, but it's something he has to keep reminding himself.

Shino's posture is typical for the Aburame; for the Inuzuka it's almost maddening with how aggressive it is.

Hinata's a bit better and worse at the same time; everything about her screams beaten down and cowed.

He can't bring them over for dinner until he's confident he can kick the ass of anyone who bothers them about it.

He sighs and trains even harder.

...

Kurenai-sensei is both a gentle mother and a harsh taskmaster.

It's bewildering as it is incredible.

"Kiba, you found me in record time! Good job." She says with a proud smile.

She raises her hands, sign forming, and says,

"Now do better."

...

He's sleeping; his dreams are both beautiful and sad. Akamaru lies by his side like always.

A familiar tapping wakes him up.

1 a.m., his alarm clock says.

He's sore and tired, but he gets up anyways. Akamaru doesn't even whine when he stuffs the ninken into the warmth of his jacket.

Sakura is waiting with an arm full of flavored bread.

...

"So." He says around a mouthful of pumpkin spiced bread.

"So." Sakura says back, pinching off pieces of her own squash flavored one.

They're sitting on a bench in a nearby park, but it doesn't feel like last time.

This feels more like a social visit than a revelation.

"Two of them?" Sakura guesses.

"Three," he corrects her, "plus their partners."

"They must be hungry for gossip." She says mildly.

The fact that they can sense his family members hiding in the bushes at all is because their spies aren't making much of an effort.

It's more of a warning not to try anything, but he's not oblivious to the bets being made behind his back.

"Just ignore 'em" He tells her.

Her lips curl in good humor, and they take a moment to enjoy each other's company.

"So, we passed Kakashi-sensei's test, obviously." Sakura tells him once they've finished eating.

"Eh, we already impressed Kurenai-sensei, so no test on our end." He says.

He does not mention the fact that Kurenai-sensei accepts their first D-rank as their genin test.

"Oh, I heard \_all \_about that." Sakura's eyes are glittering with amusement,

"Don't try to blame it on Akamaru either."

He winces. Akamaru barks out a laugh from his jacket cocoon.

"How about you tell me how your test went then," he tries, "since you know everything about mine."

Sakura laughs but drops it. She tells him about her test. She tells him that she actually ate before the exam, and that Kakashi had given her hell for it.

She speaks of how Naruto and Sasuke had tried to take on Kakashi single-handedly, and Kakashi tried to break her with genjutsu.

It may have shaken her up, but she had no problems breaking it. (And it is here that it gets interesting; \_change\_)

Naruto found her, and she managed to convince him to go get Sasuke. Sasuke was not a willing participant at first, butâ€¦

She pauses and looks him dead in the eye.

"Do you know what being teammates mean? Teammates don't abandon each other. They help each other and build each other up. Teammates are there for you no matter what. Stop ignoring us." She quotes.

He is surprised, probably more than he should be.

"He said it to Sasuke." She says almost dreamily, "He said it with such conviction. It was bizarre, like a spell enchantment."

She breaks into a grin.

"Kiba, I don't think you can own that saying anymore." She teases.

He says nothing, and she continues her tale. Of how she threw pepper and smoke bombs to throw off Kakashi's senses, how Naruto used it to hide his clones, and that Sasuke was, in turn, hiding amongst the clones to get a hold of the bells.

They were actually a few seconds too late, but she thinks they impressed Kakashi anyway.

He knows they did.

...

D-ranked missions are about as exciting as getting hit by a kunai.

It's not as bad as it could be, Kurenai-sensei does what she can to make it a more constructive experience.

Forcing them to work on genjutsu breaking while doing the mission is a particular favorite of hers.

Still, he thinks as a potato hits him in the eye, nothing will compare to their first mission of busting an amateur drug ring.

"Kai." He says in a loud whisper, forming the appropriate hand sign.

The slight sting around his eye fades, and the potatoes in his basket turn back into leaves.

"Good job, Kiba. You're faster than yesterday," Kurenai-sensei smiles, "but Akamaru broke out of his ten seconds ago."

Akamaru puffs up in pride. It's all he can do to keep from rolling his eyes.

Hinata giggles in the background, and Shino pretends they don't exist.

...

Their howls ring loud and clear through the night.

Nothing can escape them, nothing will live.

Their claws rip through the ground as if it was never there to begin with.

They fly through the air and snatch their prey.

The squirrel dies; they are victorious.

They rear back their heads and roar their pride.

"OI, GO TO BED ALREADY!" A demonic voice shouts.

Lowering the heads of their Double-headed Wolf form, they whine.

...

"Stupid. D-rank." It comes out muffled because he is currently choking on mud.

He didn't think he could taste anything nastier than Aunt Himawari's special stew, but this mud is something else.

"D-Don't worry! I-I've got Akamaru." Hinata says from somewhere to his right.

Akamaru whines about being cold. He couldn't care less because he is currently suffocating and the ninken is not.

A hand grabs him by the back of his jacket and pulls him out of the mud.

Someone hands him a handkerchief, and he wipes his eyes then his nose.

He looks up.

"Thanks, Shino."

Sunglasses shine back at him.

...

Another day, another D-rank.

This time they are doing inventory for a shopkeeper who would rather pay the mission fee than have someone else do it.

Apparently ninjas are more trustworthy than his own handpicked employees.

Even D-rank missions aren't cheap, and it speaks volumes about both the owner and the workers.

He knows they need to maintain good relations with Konoha civilians, but doesn't this guy have anything better to do? They're trying to work, and the shopkeeper keeps trying to drag them into gossip.

The shopkeeper manages to corner him to talk about girls, and he shoots Shino a pleading look.

Shino gives him the familiar stare and beckons Akamaru over to him.

Akamaru takes the invitation without even hesitating, and he's left trying to get out of the conversation on his own.

Kurenai-sensei eventually rescues him when she stops by to check up on their progress.

...

Tap, tap. Tappity, tap-tap.

He cracks an eye open and groans.

She brings milk this time.

...

"It's coming up soon." She says without any preamble.

He wonders if he can convince her to bring meat-filled bread next time.

Probably not, he knows she hates the stuff.

"Naruto's getting antsy, and so is Sasuke, come to think of it." She says, biting her lip.

Maybe some sweets? Hinata would probably like some, so they'll need extra.

"Kakashi-sensei is, well. He's Kakashi-sensei. He probably thinks we're ready." She says brow furrowing.

No wait, extra extra, can't forget Shino. He has no idea what kind of sweets the guy likes, but he'll make the Aburame eat them anyway.

"Are you even listening to me?" Sakura screams in his ear.

"You're first C-rank's coming up, you're worried about it, and you don't know what to do." He says flatly, rubbing his ear.

Akamaru is home, sleeping in a nice warm bed. He's here, getting yelled at.

Lucky dog.

"So what do I do?" She asks anxiously.

He grimaces and looks to the stars.

"You have a bunch of options," he tells her, "you just need to figure out which one you want to do."

She's still looking at him as if he holds the answer, so he continues,

"The obvious ones are: turn it down, accept it, or ask for another one."

"And the not-so-obvious?" She questions.

"Well, you can always give up halfway. You can sabotage your team and get no missions, or," he pauses, "you can go ahead and ask for a C-rank before that mission comes up."



Her eyes widen and she grabs his hands as if to proclaim her love.

"Kiba," she breathes, "you're brilliant."

He rolls his eyes.

"Don't get too excited." He warns, "You don't know what'll happen. Your next mission might be even more dangerous."

"Better than a Swordsman!" She says with a laugh, letting go of him.

While she cheers up, he can't stop the uneasy feeling inside of him.

Their first C-rank will definitely go wrong no matter what mission is picked.

Team 7 was always unlucky. Tsunade probably cursed it.

He doesn't say anything more about it.

Not to Sakura anyways.

...

Kurenai-sensei's eyebrows almost fly up to her hairline.

"You want to go on a joint C-rank?" She exclaims.

He nods. He can feel Hinata's curiosity, and Shino's assessing stare burning into his back.

Akamaru is a silent support at his side.

"With Team 7." He makes sure to remind her.

"Kiba," she says softly, "you might be ready but Hinata and Shino still need-"

"I agree with Kiba."

He blinks in surprise.

"Shino?"

"Why you ask? Because we are ready. A joint C-rank will increase experience and minimize risks. It will benefit both the client and the ninja working for the client. How? The client will receive two capable teams for the price of one while the jonin-sensei's are training their genin to work with other teams. Both will gain from such a venture." Shino manages to say it all tonelessly.

His teacher and he share a baffled look. That's the most Shino has spoken since Team 8 formed.

Kurenai-sensei doesn't say anything. Instead, her gaze lands on the girl behind him.

"Hinata?" Kurenai-sensei asks, voice gentle.

It's a loaded question, and Hinata almost trembles as she pokes her fingers together. She won't look up at any of them.

Akamaru leaves his side and sits by her foot. The ninken is a silent encouragement, and Hinata smiles down at him.

She takes a deep breath and looks up.

For a second time in his life, he is startled by the intensity in someone's eyes.

"I-I can do it." She states softly but firmly.

Kurenai-sensei closes her eyes in defeat and grimaces.

He has a feeling she's thinking about Kakashi and the paperwork involved.

He's blessed with the best teacher in the world.

His teammates (Comrades unto death) are pretty awesome too.

...

Kurenai-sensei manages to procure the mission with Team 7.

The two teams will be moving out in the morning to deliver a letter. It's a three day mission, which is being generous, and will be taking place near Konoha.

It sounds like overkill, but the risk is low and the pay, high.

A low ranked noble is trying to establish contact for the first time with a higher ranked family member.

Hiring Konoha to deliver it ensures that no one tampers with it while showing the noble's esteem at the same time.

Nothing says "I really like you, let's talk" quite the way hiring ninja does.

It's a lot of money to spend on delivery between two villages so close together, but the noble suspects his mother wants to intercept the letter.

It's not possible to hire enemy ninja this close to Konoha, so there aren't any issues assigning this one out to Team 7 and Team 8 who both have remarkable jonin for squad leaders.

...

Sis helps him put together his first mission pack, and they meet bright and early at the gates.

Sakura and Sasuke are already there.

Akamaru lets him know the rest of Team 8's scent is getting

stronger.

Sakura turns and blinks at the sound of Akamaru's bark.

"Kiba?" She asks startled, "Do you have mission outside too?"

He wonders how to answer in a way that doesn't end in screaming.

"Yeah, turns out I'm coming with you." He answers nonchalantly.

"What do you mean you're coming with me?" Sakura questions, eyebrows drawn together in confusion.

"Team 8 has placed a request to accompany Team 7 on their mission." Kurenai-sensei states, coming up behind them.

Shino and Hinata are there too, and he wonders if he missed a meet up point.

"You can do that?" Sakura asks stunned.

"Well, it's not normal procedure, and your pay will be halved. Genin have a bit more leeway in how they handle missions though." Kurenai-sensei admits.

"So why are you here, then?" Sasuke demands coldly.

He has to clamp his mouth shut to keep from baring his fangs. He doesn't care for the disrespect towards his teacher, but he can keep quiet for the mission's sake.

He taps Akamaru with his leg to keep the ninken from growling.

He makes no promises about not beating the insolence out of him afterwards.

"I am here," Kurenai-sensei proclaims with narrow eyes, "because I feel Team 8 can benefit from working alongside another team."

What she doesn't say is that he begged her with puppy-dog eyes while his teammates backed him up.

...

Naruto shows up at the last minute, and Hinata almost faints.

Naruto has difficulties comprehending the term joint mission. He stops Sakura from trying to beat it into the blond's head.

Akamaru tries to get a reaction out of Sasuke that isn't negative.

Shino is grudgingly pulled into a one-sided conversation involving sunglasses with Kurenai-sensei.

Kakashi shows up late and is put out when they barely notice.

...

They're supposed to be acting as green as possible; they're pretending to be baby genin who can't even run in case they're being tailed from Konoha.

They've chosen to place the teachers at the front and back with the genin paired up in twos in between.

Because the town isn't that far from Konoha, they've decided to stroll rather than walk.

It's a bit unexpected because they aren't walking with a client, but it's a nice day.

Kakashi is behind him, reading the ever famous orange book. Shino's next to him, and Sakura and Hinata are in front of him. Akamaru is riding on top of his head.

He is more than content with this formation; something inside of him is satisfied in an unexplainable way.

He's not unaware of the calculating look Kakashi keeps giving him, but the man smells of protection; he has no problem leaving his back to the jonin.

He's not surprised when Kakashi speaks up.

"Your sensei asked to do a C-rank mission with us. I turned her down at first, then she threatened to make everyone around me think I'm a woman." Kakashi tells him, humor rolling off of him.

"I did no such thing!" Kurenai-sensei calls from the front, "I merely suggested others may be a bit confused about your disposition."

Kakashi lazily gives her a "yeah, yeah" motion and goes back to his book.

Sakura giggles at the imagery; Hinata is smiling next to her. Naruto zeroes in on Kurenai-sensei's potential pranking abilities. Sasuke pretends he's not listening in, and Shino is giving Naruto a "my sensei, \_mine\_" stare.

Even though it can't last, he knows these are the moments he lives for.

(He truly does have the best teacher in the world)

...

They bunker down for the night; it's more for training purposes than because they need to.

They've already learned how to properly camp on various type of missions, but their teachers want to make sure.

It's for that reason they build two separate campfires with two separate parameters even though they're set up right next to each other.

Team 8 is flawless and has their food cooking in no time.

Team 7 isâ€|well they're still working on it.

(Naruto screams in frustration because the animals can sense his malicious chakra and run off. Sasuke is unable to get the fire going for no apparent reason, and Sakura is being forced to sit back and watch because of the boys' prides. Kakashi is watching all this with a flat expression)

...

Team 8 is shamelessly watching Team 7 like they're on stage.

Akamaru keeps a running commentary that only he can understand.

Hinata's eyes never stray from Naruto, and Kurenai-sensei is smiling almost mockingly at Kakashi.

Shino is smug of course.

...

Team 7 is strange compared to their original version.

Their new rapport is veryâ€|interesting.

It's almost like watching a comedy act, really.

Naruto shouts into Sasuke's face while waving a rabbit leg around. Sasuke flicks rib cage bones back at him with a sneer. The Uchiha manages to goad Naruto into being even louder.

None of it has any real heat behind it, more childish play than anything.

Sakura lets them bicker while she eats her own meal. Once finished, she sets her stake aside and cracks her knuckles.

Naruto and Sasuke don't even notice her until she's standing over them.

Snarling, she shoves their faces into the dirt and doesn't let go until Kakashi ambles his way over.

Their sensei asks, in a very pleasant voice, for her to let go so his mentally challenged students don't get worse. She reluctantly lets them up for air before heading back to her original seat.

Sasuke and Naruto watch her go warily while whispering to each other.

Sakura pretends not to notice, and Kakashi gives her a pat on the head for not murdering her teammates.

...

They make it to the village early morning.

Team 8 meets with the contact to receive the letter and pretends not to notice the man watching them from the shadows.

They play up their inexperience a bit for their audience, and Kurenai-sensei reassures their contact of her own capabilities.

Once the contact leaves, Team 7 greets them with the news that Kurenai-sensei is needed back at the village and surely her genin squad is capable of delivering a letter by themselves, right?

He hugs Sakura before Team 7 heads in the opposite direction and hands her the letter on the sly.

They say their goodbyes to the other team and to their teacher.

Team 8 will be the decoy while Team 7 delivers the document.

It's a good plan, but an uneasy feeling is swirling in his gut.

It's an odd feeling; he knows something bad is about to happen.

He's not about to let that stop him from continuing the mission though. (Both teams are going home, alive and in one piece)

He places the false document in the front of his jacket, ensuring it bulges in just the right way.

Shino leads; Hinata guards the rear. Akamaru stays to his right, and Kurenai-sensei hides under a genjutsu to his left.

He hopes it's enough.

...

Things go right, then they go wrong.

They succeed in pulling their pursuers off of Team 7.

Hinata counts six, and Akamaru confirms it.

Shino is leading them to the ambush point; Kurenai-sensei is weaving genjutsu after genjutsu.

They're almost there, when the enemy start to wise-up and split themselves off.

Three of the mercenaries flank them to their right. The other three are suddenly gaining on their left.

That's not what goes wrong.

It's when Hinata gasps and alerts them to incoming ninja that things take a turn for the worst.

...

The enemy ninja are on a whole other level. He can smell the strength rolling off of them, and they aren't even close yet.

Akamaru's helping Hinata track their movements; to their dismay, the enemy has no interest in letters made by low rank nobles.

The enemy is ignoring Team 8 all together and is making for Team 7.

It's alarming because this means Team 7 is being specifically targeted.

He knows Kakashi is strong enough to protect his students, but he can't help remembering the mission from Wave.

If anything happens to Sakuraâ€¦

The men playing with swords need to go before they can do anything.

...

They continue to the ambush point. The trap would fail against smarter opponents; all of them are too tense and twitchy to be convincing.

The mercenaries think they're hitting them on two sides, that they've cornered baby genin and won.

They lost the moment they came against Team 8.

The enemy swordsmen enter the designated clearing, raise their hands to their swords and freeze.

Shino's kikaichu are both powerful and incredibly terrifying.

He's been slowly planting his bugs onto the men since this goose chase began.

The swordsmen watch with wide and frightened eyes as Team 8 descends upon them under the watchful eye of their teacher.

He doesn't even blink as he slashes their throats open.

His only thought is that he needs to get to Team 7.

These pitiful creatures are a mere annoyance.

...

Akamaru only barks Sakura's name, and Shino has withdrawn into himself.

Hinata throws up into the bushes.

Kurenai-sensei is there with encouragement and gentle eyes.

His teammates are both paler than normal, and Hinata's gaze keeps ending up on the corpses drowning in blood. Still, they temper their emotions and await further orders.

He wants to reassure them, but the only thing he can think about is pink hair. (He's so, so proud of them even though it pains him at the

same time)

Kurenai-sensei orders them to move out; they're going to back up Team 7.

None of them hesitate.

...

He and Akamaru catch the scent of their new enemy.

They smell of ozone, death, and hatred.

Three are, without a doubt, jonin level. Their power is almost overwhelming to his nose.

There are at least five lesser ninja with them, but none of them are push-overs.

As they race to their comrades' (Comrades unto death) side, he can feel the unasked question hanging in the air.

Why are foreign ninja this close to Konoha?

...

Kakashi's summons are out, surrounding the genin in a protective circle.

The jonin is zipping around like a demented lightning rod, catching and throwing back the lightning jutsu that are coming from everywhere at once. He's doing everything he can to protect his students.

Sasuke has already been taken out, and Sakura is kneeling beside him, medical jutsu steadily going.

Naruto is nowhere to be seen.

Team 8 bursts on the scene like a fire given oil.

They give no one time to react, as Kurenai-sensei distracts them into misfiring their jutsu, Shino and Hinata take on a defensive position beside him, and he and Akamaru go for the nearest enemy's throat.

He trusts them to defend his weak spots while he and Akamaru practically blinds themselves in a heavy-hitting assault.

He doesn't even realize his opponent is dead until his teammates herd him next to Sakura, Kakashi's summons letting them into their protective ring.

"Are you hurt? Where's Naruto?" He asks, heart pounding in his ears.

He's having trouble filtering the scents; he can't tell if she's been injured or not.

Her face is pale and there is fear dimming her eyes.



"I-I don't know. They just all went after Sasuke. It wasâ€"it was a mess. Naruto thought they killed him, and he ran off after that crazy guy. I'm fine." She adds almost as an afterthought.

He nods and inhales. She smells like shock and fear, but also like determination and anger. She doesn't smell like her own blood.

She's fine and he can breathe again.

Now that he can think, he does so.

The enemy are incredibly powerful ninja who wear no headbands. They smell like something foreign, but also like the Land of Fire. They're very close to Konoha and have decided to go after the last Uchiha.

He doesn't remember this happening in the manga.

Something is off; he feels like he has all the pieces for the puzzle, but they aren't fitting together correctly.

"What do we do?" Hinata asks, and he forgets about it for the moment.

They are literally surrounded, and their target is Sasuke. Kurenai-sensei and Kakashi have dragged the jonin classed ninja away, leaving four weaker opponents behind.

He knows they would have never left if Kakashi's summons weren't there with them.

It's unfortunate that the enemy knows a way around this issue.

Hand signs he has never heard of are simultaneously used, and the dogs' connection to this world is cut.

They vanish in a puff of smoke, and their line of defense is gone.

"Get ready." He tells her grimly, activating the Four Legs Technique.

...

Their enemies fight with a fervor that seems almost single-minded; all they want is to get to Sasuke.

Shino is their main offense, the ninja are unable to land a hit on the elusive Aburame, and he is using Insect Clones to drain their chakra and land a hit at the same time.

He and Akamaru are going after anyone who gets too close to Sasuke.

Hinata's Gentle Fist isn't incredibly strong yet, but Sakura is darting around her with chakra blades on her fingernails and a fierce snarl on her lips. Hinata is able to plan her movement around the other girl, and the two of them make for an incredible defense.

Shino takes out one of the ninjas before taking a hit to the stomach.

The Aburame goes down and does not get back up.

He sees red, and he howls. Akamaru joins him and together they rush the enemy.

...

Sakura is doing her best to heal Sasuke and Shino, but she's exhausted and their injuries are extensive.

Hinata is guarding her back. Her Byakugan is activated and her Gentle Fist stance is determined.

He and Akamaru are making sure the only path the enemy can take is through Hinata.

Fang Passing Fang is not meant to be a barrier, but that's what they've turned it into.

He's getting tired and dizzy, but he and Akamaru keep rotating forwards and backwards, left to right.

It takes everything he has to keep alert instead of letting vertigo blur everything away.

(The world is spinning, no he's spinning, no Akamaru is)

Metal and lightning are still being deflected by their technique, and he knows he can't stop any time soon.

He hopes Naruto is okay.

...

The trees explode all around them, and he doesn't have time to think.

"To your right!" Hinata cries.

He and Akamaru go after the ninja who is making a beeline for Sakura and her patients.

Using Passing Fang, he rips the ninja to shreds. Akamaru uses his own version to strike an enemy trying to sneak up from behind.

He makes the mistake of pausing to rest.

He's wearied and he's reaching for his soldier pills when it happens.

He feels an excruciating pain that seems to pass through to his very soul, and then the world spins a final time.

Sakura screams his name.

...

There's another explosion.

He thinks he hears Naruto's grating voice and feels relief.

Everything's going to be fine now. He can trust Naruto with his precious people.

He fades out.

...

Sakura is crying.

His vision's foggy and his head feels like it's being smothered, but he knows the smell of her tears.

They haunt his dreams sometimes.

Water hits his face and he remembers to breathe.

Ah, he thinks, not water.

Sakura is crying over him. Something in his chest feels like it's dying. It's a terrible feeling.

Where is Akamaru?

Green fills his vision, and the smell of Sakura's chakra is suddenly overwhelming.

Oblivion greets him.

...

It's dark and everything is still and quiet. He wonders if he's dead.

If he is, he hopes Akamaru is too. He'd hate to leave his partner behind to suffer.

Sakura and his teammates would be able to go on without him, but Akamaru would have a hard time.

He kind of hopes he's not dead; it's kind of boring, here in the darkness.

All he can do is think.

So he does.

Their C-rank was a disaster. The enemy was powerful and strangely persistent. Due to the nature of Sasuke's injuries they were aiming to kill, not capture.

How weird is that? Being the last Uchiha and a fresh genin, Sasuke is weak and extremely valuable.

Speaking of weird, he doesn't know any technique to disrupt a summon. He didn't think it was possible.

Someone would have had to devote their entire life to creating it in secret, and then they go and use it on a bunch of genin?

A bunch of super powered ninja who all knew the technique, waiting outside of Konoha?

It almost seems like it was tailor-made for going after Sasuke. To create and train ninja with the jutsu, and then get them into the heart of the Land of Fire, they would have to have known about Kakashi before he was Team 7's-

He gasps and opens his eyes.

...

He's in a hospital, and Akamaru is bundled up in bandages next to him.

The smell of cleaning supplies and sickness makes his eyes water.

He has a heart monitor, and he wonders how he couldn't hear that infernal beeping.

Akamaru's asleep, and while he feels anxious to know what happened, the ninken has earned his rest.

Troubled thoughts are churning inside of him, and he has much to ponder on.

He needs to sort through his feelings before he's ready to take on anything else.

...

A nurse checks on him and congratulates him of not dying to a heart attack.

He thanks her, though it comes out more of a question than a statement.

No one comes to visit, and he decides to wake Akamaru before he does something stupid.

...

To his relief, everyone's fine. Shino is being cared for at home, and Hinata didn't receive more than scratches. Sakura had to be admitted for chakra exhaustion, but it wasn't too bad.

Naruto is better than ever, and Sasuke is still recovering. Sasuke doesn't need to stay at the hospital due to Sakura's intervention, but he's been threatened with it if he tries to train with his new Sharingan eyes.

Kakashi and Kurenai-sensei disappeared the moment they were given the all clear on their students' health.

They have a lot to discuss with Intelligence, he's willing to bet.

Still, knowing that his comrades (unto death, into life) are safe, he's able to go back to sleep.

He feels no remorse for the lives ended by his hands.

...

Hinata pops by to visit in the morning; she doesn't stutter when speaking to him.

She brings paper and ink; she gives him the kicked puppy look when he expresses his irritation at having to write his report in his hospital bed.

He feels terrible and wishes she'd quit it already.

Still, it's nice to see that she's well with his own senses, and he's glad she stopped by.

She even leaves a pink rose by his bedside.

...

Team 7 stops by a few hours later.

Sakura doesn't say anything and just looks at him as if she's never seen him before.

Naruto is bouncy and Sasuke is broody, but there is a warm atmosphere inside the room.

He thinks they are as relieved to see him, as he is to see them.

He's hesitant to call Naruto and Sasuke friends, but he doesn't mind the thought.

They catch up.

Naruto tells him how Kakashi has left them to their own devices, telling them to enjoy the break and not to get anyone pregnant.

"Tch, lazy pervert!" Naruto exclaims.

Sasuke doesn't say much, but he positively preens when his Sharingan is mentioned.

Sakura still hasn't said a word.

The two boys share a glance and Naruto loudly proclaims he's going to go find the gift shop. Sasuke scoffs and tells him he couldn't find a paper bag. Akamaru decides to join them, and they bicker all the way out the door.

It's funny because he's pretty sure the hospital doesn't even have a gift shop.

...

They're alone now, and there is nothing stopping him from telling Sakura his theory.

Exceptâ€¦|

Green eyes bore into his, a suspicious shine to them; he hesitates.

He decides to wait a bit before springing it on her. Better for them to get this conversation out of the way first.

"So." He says.

"So." She says back wobbly.

He looks up at the ceiling and tries to think of something clever.

"Got any bread?" He asks.

He's unprepared for the tackle that almost sets off his heart monitor.

...

"I thought I lost you." She whispers into his shoulder.

He rubs her back and tries to figure out how to keep her from crying.

"I take hits from Ma harder than that." He tries.

It's a miss because he can feel her breath hitching.

"What," she says still hiding her face in his shoulder, "possessed you to come?"

"It's not like I can just reject Kurenai-sensei's orders." He says with humor.

"Plus you know I would never leave you like that." He says softly.

She trembles slightly before taking a deep breath.

He blinks as she leans back to give him an irritated look. She raps her knuckles lightly on his forehead.

"I meant, why did you ask for the joint mission?" She asks, annoyed.

He winces.

"Found out about that, huh?" He hums up to the ceiling in thought.

"Had a feeling." Is all he says.

Sakura sighs in frustration, but drops it. A thoughtful look crosses

her face.

"You know, I get that destiny says we're not allowed normal missions, but this was pretty bizarre." She taps her lips.

"I never knew of a technique that could dispel a summons." She states, forehead scrunched.

Now, he knows, is the best time to speak up. She's incredibly intelligent and might come to the conclusion herself. (She won't because she doesn't want to, his mind whispers)

He tries to tell her his theory, but the words don't come out.

"I'm sure everyone's worried about that." He says instead.

He never tells her.

...

Sasuke, Naruto, and Akamaru make their triumph return. He's surprised because they come back with a tiny cactus.

"Totally found that gift store!" Naruto exclaims jubilantly.

Sasuke rolls his eyes, but there's a slight curl to his lips. Akamaru jumps back onto the bed and settles down.

He pretends he can't smell the same florist shop Hinata visited on their clothes.

"Guess I'll be needing to invite you guys over for dinner sometime." He admits fondly.

Sakura blanches from her hospital seat, but Naruto is giving him a wide-eyed look.

"Really?" He asks, bouncing in nervousness.

"Yeah, gotta get Shino and Hinata over first, but we're," the next word is both heavy and easy to say, "friends now."

Sasuke just "Hn"s, but Naruto is grinning from ear to ear.

Sakura stands up and looms over him

"You can't have anyone over if your heart gives out." She asserts irritably.

Now that the fear of losing her accomplice has been dealt with, anger has taken its place.

It's a bit annoying, but she's always been like that. He wouldn't have her any other way.

"Eh, I'll be up and running in no time." He tells her to rile her up.

"If that's how you feel then I guess you don't need visitors." She hisses.

"Well, maybe not then. I wouldn't mind apples." He says.

"Fine." She scowls down at him.

Naruto and Sasuke watch their drama, perplexed.

He considers his next words and wonders if it's even worth mentioning.

"Doctor," he says seriously and Sakura's eyebrows draw together in confusion, "will I ever walk again?"

She stares at him flatly before lifting the clipboard off his bed.

She smacks him with it so hard he has no doubt everyone in the next three rooms heard it.

"I can't believe you!" She screeches as she stomps off, clipboard still in hand.

Her teammates are left gaping at her back.

Akamaru laughs at him, and he relaxes back into the pillows with a smirk.

It had been totally worth it.

...

Ma and Sis welcome him back with hair ruffles and forehead flicks.

The craziness of home is like a balm to a wound he didn't know he had.

He's got orders not to strain his heart for the next four days, after that he should be able to ease his way back into training.

The clan seems to be waiting for him to say something, but he has no idea what.

Sakura rolls her eyes and tells him it's obvious if he just thinks about it.

He can't seem to reach enlightenment, so he thinks about the other thing weighing on his mind.

He can't distract himself with training; he can't ignore the truth.

He didn't tell Sakura because he's not sure he should warn her.

This person is gunning for Sasuke, and they might not be wrong to do so.

If Sasuke (Comrades unto death) winds up betraying his team (Comrades unto death), betrays Sakura (Comrades unto death), betrays him\_ (Comrades unto death)\_â€|



He might just kill Sasuke himself.

#### 4. With Our Comrades 2

"Alright, thanks for your hard work." The ninja behind the mission desk says cheerfully.

Akamaru lets a yawn; he reaches down and pats his partner in sympathy. Shino and Hinata don't say anything, but he can smell their exhaustion.

Ever since that disastrous mission, Team 8 has been training nonstop.

When Kurenai-sensei isn't throwing strategy and battle simulations at them, they're burning through missions like no one's business.

When Kurenai-sensei is done, their clans practically fall on top of each other to knock the stuffing out of them.

They get just enough sleep to keep them going before the cycle repeats.

The four of them are getting worn down, slowly and surely. Shino's flat out stopped communicating, and Hinata's newly found confidence has taken a nosedive.

The worst part is that he hasn't seen Sakura for weeks.

He hasn't had time to ponder over the new game changer; he's barely surviving.

On a positive note, he's managed to create a Shadow Clone.

It was only for three seconds, but it was an awesome three seconds.

...

"Put your back into it!" Ma barks before her fist connects with his face.

He's sent flying, and Akamaru races to his side.

He can feel the sweat rolling down his neck and hears Akamaru's heavy panting beside him.

He gets back up only to get knocked back down.

...

"Hinata's been captured, and Shino has been compromised. What do you do?" Kurenai-sensei asks.

A senbon is digging into Hinata's temple, and she trembles in a silent Shino's hold.

It's a genjutsu, but it hurts all the same.

He closes his eyes and thinks.

Akamaru lets out a whine beside him.

...

"The hell!" He shrieks, clawing at his nose.

"Suck it up!" Sis shouts at him, "Your sense of smell is your greatest strength and your greatest weakness. Your enemies are going to throw much worse at you."

Well, yes, he understands that, but he's this close to slicing off his own nose.

The powder thrown into his face stings his eyes, but he barely feels that over the excruciating pain that smelling it is causing.

He knows rationally that it can't last forever, but he feels kind of like he's dying.

Dampening his sense of smell isn't working, and it's just so painful.

In a last ditch effort, he knocks himself out.

...

"Again." Kurenai-sensei says.

He stares at Hinata who is watching him with wearied eyes.

Her stance is meek, and she's no longer speaking to him.

This is wrong; she already smells like defeat.

He glances at Shino, and knows the Aburame is worried too.

Kurenai-sensei watches them, but she isn't seeing them.

It only hits him now on why that is.

They were thrown into a fight they hadn't been ready for; they killed, they fought, and then they nearly died. Their teacher wasn't there.

They've had time to heal and overcome these things; Kurenai-sensei is still stuck watching her students die.

He takes out a kunai and glances towards his teacher.

Akamaru gives him a nod and seems to know exactly what he's planning.

"Sorry." He says, before plunging the kunai into his thigh.

It hurts, but he breathes through the pain.

"Kiba!" Kurenai-sensei shouts rushing to him.

She tries to unwrap his fingers from around the handle, but he's not letting go. He vaguely notes Hinata is panicking and yelling at Shino for bandages. Akamaru is trying to keep them away.

It's interesting, but that's not what he needs to be concerned about right now.

"Sensei," he begins quietly, "I'm bleeding because I'm alive."

She stops and looks at him. Shino and Hinata are hovering behind her, listening.

"I'm alive." He repeats, making sure to look her dead in the eye.

"I know you want us to be prepared to take on anything, but we're useless if we're tired. Hinata's too drained to be the badass she is, and Shino doesn't even buzz anymore."

He takes a breath and pulls the kunai out.

"We're alive." He stresses.

Kurenai-sensei finally sees them again.

...

Hinata quietly bandages him up after making sure he hasn't hit anything serious. Shino is standing guard like an over protective tree.

Kurenai-sensei quietly apologizes and tells them to take the rest of the day off.

She leaves, but there is a purpose to her stride. He wonders what she's up to.

His teammates bully him into finding Sakura to inspect his self-inflicted wound, and he invites them over for dinner.

It's been dark for a while, but he thinks he can see the sun.

...

Sakura rags him at first, but eventually tells him she understands.

Her chakra is soothing. He's glad to smell it again. Akamaru's just glad to see her.

"Kakashi-sensei isn't driving us into the ground," she says once her hands are no longer lit, "but he's certainly upped our training. He's not as late as he was before."

It's been peaceful; their childhoods were mainly filled with the stress of the future.

He thinks the jonin are holding their breath for war.

He can't blame them; war is coming.

It's just not what they're thinking.

...

Ma and Sis are standing in front of him, arms crossed.

He watches them warily, wondering what he did to sic them both on him

"Apparently," Ma says dragging it out with a sneer, "we're beating you up too much."

He tilts his head in confusion.

"Your teacher stopped by and threatened to make us believe our ninken were cats if we didn't let you get some rest." Sis says flatly.

He can't stop his mouth from opening in shock.

Akamaru questions them because his voice has failed him.

"Tch, I ain't scared of some genjutsu crap," Ma scowls, "but the girl has a point."

"You're slipping from overwork." Sis clarifies.

"We won't have as much time for training, so from now on you have to work even harder." Ma growls at him.

"You're doing well, Kiba." Sis smiles and ruffles his hair.

It's confusing, but he wonders if he's in love with his sensei.

...

Team 8 only does light training the next day.

Kurenai-sensei says she has an idea she wants to run by someone. She tells them she'll come get them for lunch and leaves them staring at each other.

He's mystified by it all but decides to take the break offered to him.

"So, did anyone else have sensei talk to their parents?" He asks.

Hinata and Shino share a look.

"Yes, Kurenai-sensei said some-" Hinata struggles to say delicately, "-not so nice things. Father hasn't said anything more about training."

"Kurenai-sensei also appeared at the main house. For what? To offer orders layered under suggestions to lighten the amount of family-style training. My parents have agreed. Why? Because they,

too, are concerned about my health." Shino states.

He throws his head back and laughs.

"She threatened to make my family see cats instead of ninken." He tells them with a grin.

Hinata breaks into giggles, and Shino buzzes in amusement.

...

They have some time left before their teacher comes back. It feels wrong to stand by and do nothing.

To keep from being bored, he forces them to play blind-man's tag. They have to keep their eyes closed, but there is also stipulations.

Hinata isn't allowed to use her Byakugan, and Shino can't use his kikaichu.

Akamaru and he suppress their ability to smell.

It's unnerving and feels wrong, but this is a training session as much as it is a game.

One day they may not have a choice about being unable to rely on their main sense.

For now though, it's just a game, and Akamaru is winning.

When he accuses the ninken of cheating, blind-man's tag turns into a free for all.

They're still training, but they're also having fun. (They revel in being alive)

Shino and Akamaru are left standing victorious, having secretly partnered up behind everyone's back.

He calls them both traitors, but he is smiling.

...

Lunch is at a familiar barbecue restaurant.

Hinata is squirming on his left, and Shino is stiff on his right. Akamaru has been placed on top of his head and is pretending to be a stuffed animal.

He's pretty sure this place doesn't have a problem with nin-animals, but they've decided to keep quiet just this once.

They can test the restaurant's limits later. He's more concerned about the current situation.

Kurenai-sensei sits at the head of the table to their right, and Asuma sits across from her.

Team 10 fills in the other side; Shikamaru is slouching in the middle

with Choji to his left, Ino to his right.

He's not worried, but that doesn't stop him from acknowledging that Konoha's most dangerous genin is sitting directly across from him.

...

It's an awkward affair.

He's not sure the tense atmosphere helps.

"Hinata, you've done something to your hair?" Ino questions uncertainly.

"A-Ah." Hinata tries to answer.

Shikamaru lets his forehead hit the table, and Choji stares at the grill.

Their teachers are watching with sharp eyes when they're not giving each other mushy looks. (They think no one notices; he wonders who doesn't)

He's trying to pretend he's on a mission; it doesn't work. This is just a really terrible lunch.

...

What no one says is that this table is filled with nothing but clan heirs who don't want repercussions from bad interactions.

It's politics, plain and simple.

The Yamanaka, Nara, and Akimichi are too intertwined to break, but they're the only families with such close ties.

The Akimichi, Aburame, and Hyuuga share the title Noble Clan, but maintain a polite distance from each other.

This will change if Shino and Hinata decide to remain friends after their genin squad breaks apart. (He knows they will)

Because Sasuke has no real power politically, the power shift between the Noble Clans will be felt.

The Aburame share a bizarre synergy with the Yamanaka involving plants, and the Nara pretend they're uninterested in clan politics while using their connections wisely.

His own family is almost isolated, though that could change soon. The Inuzuka despise the Hyuuga and the Aburame, but there is a grudging respect there.

All he has to do is keep his teammates close, knock down anyone who gives them trouble, and the Inuzuka will follow his lead.

Exceptâ€¦|

Ah, that's what his clan wants from him.

He does a Shikamaru and lets his face slam into the table.

...

On retrospect, that was a bad idea.

...

Akamaru goes flying onto Shikamaru, and Hinata leaps for the ninken without a second thought.

A bottle of sauce is knocked over, and Ino starts screaming about her shirt.

Hinata looks near tears; Shino suggests that Ino should shut up by killing herself. (Not in so many words)

Choji is not one to stand for such things and is threatening Shino. Shino mocks him for it.

Shikamaru doesn't move, but he can smell the irritation rolling off the shadow-user.

Akamaru is giving him a dirty look, and he buries his face in his arms.

He decides he doesn't care.

About any of it.

...

Their jonin-sensei manage to restore order, but the atmosphere is left silent and chilly.

The lines have been drawn, and it's messy.

As of now, the Aburame have formed a pact with the Hyuuga, and are at odds with the Akimichi.

The Yamanaka have a grievance with the Hyuuga, and the Nara will be backing both while denying it.

The Hyuuga are staying out of it, but will back the Aburame if push comes to shove.

He, himself, is a non-factor at the moment.

While the heirs have no actual say in clan politics, if feelings fester into adulthood, this will be exactly what happens.

It's all really stupid and shows exactly why the Inuzuka are by themselves.

His family may be crazy, but at least they're sane.

...

Team 8 and Team 10 have a joint training session tomorrow morning.

He doesn't know if anyone will survive if both teams are pitted against each other.

Shino wants to murder Choji, and Shikamaru probably won't let that slide.

This is just going to end in tears; he knows it.

...

"So, Kiba," Kurenai-sensei says chillingly, "since you're so excited about making friends, let's work out some of that energy."

He's forced to deflect shuriken and kunai while upside-down, feet attached with chakra to a tree-limb.

Shino and Hinata are carefully throwing, and Kurenai-sensei is over-seeing them.

Akamaru is next to Kurenai-sensei, satisfaction written all over him.

He thinks this must be love.

...

Shino is scheming something, and Hinata is depressed over ruining Ino's shirt. They take a rain check on dinner.

He shrugs and tells them, "Next time, then."

He's not upset; they'll be coming over soon enough.

Akamaru barks out a suggestion, and he decides to let Sis know no one's coming home for dinner.

...

He greets Sakura's parents with an armload of food; Akamaru is carefully holding a flower between his teeth.

"Here for dinner, then?" Mrs. Haruno asks, kneeling in front of Akamaru.

He knows the older woman has a weakness for the ninken; so long as Akamaru is here, he can get away with practically anything.

"Son!" Mr. Haruno cries from the kitchen table, "Come eat, your parents missed you so!"

"Dad!" Sakura screams, hitting her father.

She's careful to judge her strength, so her father is only sent flying a little bit.

It's a loving family Sakura's been blessed with, and he likes to think he can consider them family too.



Just not the way they want him to.

He takes his place at their table, and Mrs. Haruno asks him to call her "Mom" as she always does, Akamaru in her lap.

Sakura twitches, while her father pouts when he refuses to call the man, "Dad."

He knows the Harunos already consider him their son-in-law, but Sakura would throw a fit if he humored them.

...

Sakura walks him home. He tells her about tomorrow's training exercise with Team 10. (He doesn't tell her anything about the possible feuds he may have started)

Her eyebrows draw together.

"Strange, I think Kakashi-sensei has something planned tomorrow too. He asked us to meet up earlier than usual." She says thoughtfully.

Akamaru rides in her arms, and barks out a question.

He plays translator between ninken and girl, and they carefully avoid all mentions of upcoming exams.

They bid goodbye once they hit the fields that begin the Inuzuka territory.

Home is crawling with dogs and loud noises; he doesn't understand how anyone could live any differently.

He blanches when he smells a certain odor drifting in the wind.

...

Aunt Himawari is put out because she made her special stew, and he has to thank every deity he knows for Team 10's good timing.

Clan feuds have nothing on Old Aunties who can't be avoided. (Aunt Himawari's ninken died years ago; he's obligated to choke down terrible cooking while complementing it.)

He's glad Shino and Hinata have been saved from a terrible fate.

...

Team 10 is nowhere to be seen, but Team 8 likes to arrive early.

He greets Shino and Hinata, and Akamaru demands cuddles that the Hyuuga happily gives.

Shino is giving the Aburame version of an evil cackle.

He decides he's not touching that, and time passes peacefully.

He smells Team 10 almost at the same time he hears them.

Ino is just that loud.

She's dragging Shikamaru by the arm and Choji is following behind, munching away.

The moment the Akimichi's eyes lock with Shino's sunglasses, he can almost hear the crackle.

He's honestly rather impressed.

...

"Alright," Asuma says to them, "we've decided to make this a race. The teams will be competing with each other to retrieve the target first."

The jonin takes a moment to enjoy his cigarette.

"Well?" Ino demands, "What's the target?"

"There are a couple of things you need to know," He continues, ignoring Ino entirely, "you'll each be given two clues, but you'll be unable to share it. You'll need to work out where and what your target is. You have the entire afternoon to find it."

"You will not leave the boundaries we set. You cannot conscript outside help. There will be no sabotage. We'll have judges monitoring you to ensure you follow the rules." Kurenai-sensei says sternly.

"Since this is a competition, we've decided that the winners will either get a day off," Asuma says looking at Shikamaru, "or a free meal." He finishes looking at Choji.

"Your judges will be observing you every step of the way," Kurenai-sensei interjects, "and if you try to give your clue away, you're going to be doing some extra training."

She's smiling gently, but there is an ominous dark cloud hanging behind her.

They shiver.

"So it's a race between us and Team 8, right?" Ino asks warily, "Are we allowed to know who the judges are?"

"No, and you won't be competing with Team 8." Asuma says with a devious smirk.

"U-Um, then are weâ€|?" Hinata trails off uncertainty.

"Oh, you're going to have teammates, just not cell teammates." Kurenai-sensei says with a smile.

...

The jonin-sensei pair them into teams of two:

Shino's stuck with Shikamaru, and Hinata's with Choji.

This leaves him with Ino.

It doesn't fill him with confidence, but maybe it won't be so bad.

...

"Ugh! I can't believe I'm stuck with dog-boy!" She screams stomping her foot.

"Oi! You're not exactly the cream of the crop yourself." He growls.

"What? You're lucky to have me!" She shouts in his face.

"Lucky like a disease." He spits back.

...

This is about as well as it goes.

...

"Let's just get this over with." She hisses.

"Fine." He says.

Akamaru is watching them warily, and he's forced to be a buffer for the ninken.

Akamaru won't go near Ino until she stops screaming.

...

His clue is food and red.

It's broad and vague, but Ino's clues supposedly narrows it down.

He also knows how Kurenai-sensei works; it'll be sitting right in front of their faces while they're too busy thinking.

If he had Hinata or Shino, he's sure he wouldn't have much of a problem.

But, well, Ino.

...

"What kind of clues are these!" Ino says through gritted teeth.

"If I knew, I wouldn't be here." He growls back.

He can't help it, everything about the girl makes him want to hit her.

Normally he can restrain himself to cold interactions, but she is really getting on his nerves.

...

He's decided the best bet for the clue "food" is either in the merchant district or the Akimichi district.

Ino points him towards the merchant district, and they make some form of progress.

She's still irritating though.

...

He senses her watching them on the rooftop. He knows that smell anywhere.

"Oi, Sakura, did Kurenai-sensei rope you into this, too?" He barks up to her.

Ino gapes as the pink-haired girl seemingly drops from nowhere.

"You're not supposed to be talking to me." Sakura says, but she's smiling, eyes bright.

He believes she's laughing at his misfortune.

"So you're the judge." He says.

"Her? But she's a new genin too!" Ino doesn't shout, but it's a near thing.

"And you didn't sense her, did you?" He shoots back irritably.

Sakura is watching them like they're her new interesting specimens, and he knows it's time to go.

She only gets that look when she wants to experiment.

...

It happens when he can't sense Sakura, and the two of them are isolated from anyone else.

He later realizes that an awareness of these facts set it into motion.

He snaps.

...

"You're not trying hard enough!" Ino screeches, "I can't let Hinata beat me!"

"Oi," he says warningly, "it was an accident. Don't pick on Hinata."

"Then she shouldn't be so clumsy! Isn't she the heiress? Aren't the Hyuuga supposed to be, I don't know, \_graceful\_?" Ino fires

back.

It's all boiling to a point, and he doesn't even realize it.

"Shut your mouth, pig." He says without thinking.

She freezes.

"What did you call me, you mutt?" She asks dangerously.

He no longer cares.

"You heard me," he snarls, "Hinata may be clumsy, but at least she's not a useless pig."

"Oh that is it!" She screams balling her fist.

She's reaching to punch him, but it's almost like it's in slow motion.

He has her on the ground before she knows what happened.

It was pathetically easy to leg sweep her.

He has his knee in her back, his grip is tight on the arm that tried to take a swing at him, and he can smell her fear.

He revels in it. (He's alive)

"You're useless." He taunts, "You've done nothing but look at boys and primp yourself in front of the mirror all these years. What kind of ninja are you?"

She doesn't say anything.

"You couldn't even sense Sakura, and you definitely can't compare to Hinata." He continues,

"Sakura trains hard every day to protect the things she loves, what about you?"

He lets her go with a scornful snort.

"You're supposed to be better than this. You can be if you just try."

...

Ino's face is covered in dirt, and there are hints of tears in her eyes.

It must be from anger because she smells engulfed in it.

"Don't you," she says sharply, "ever call me useless again. A flower is useless, my teammates are useless, your dog's useless-"

He snarls.

"I. Am not. Useless." She finishes in a harsh whisper.

Akamaru keeps him from going after her when she turns tail and flees.

...

How dare she? How dare she speak to him like that?

How dare she try to pin her own failings on Hinata and Akamaru?

He's going to-

Akamaru bites him lightly on the leg.

He lets out an aggravated sigh and tries to let go of his anger.

It's hard.

The Inuzuka way says to let out your rage physically. To tire the body and heal the mind.

If he tries to beat Ino up; he might just kill her by accident.

He decides to search for Sakura's soothing scent instead.

It works.

...

He's missed lunch, he doesn't know where or what his target is, and Ino has stormed off.

If he believed in karma, this is where he'd start feeling bad.

Short-term aggravation aside, he's happy, well-fed, and surrounded by friends and family.

Karma doesn't exist.

...

"Looks like we're going to have to find her, huh?" He asks Akamaru gloomily.

Akamaru gives him a sympathetic bark, but tells him to man up.

Teammates don't abandon each other, the ninken says.

He rolls his eyes and starts trying to figure out where Ino's scent trail begins.

He doesn't know if she'll take him back, but he has to try.

...

They're following her scent through an alleyway when Akamaru

stills.

The ninken's posture is sending off all kinds of warning bells through his head.

Instinct sends him into a crouch beside the ninken, and he opens his senses to their max.

He smells it.

\_Ozone, death, and hatred.\_

He smells it, and they are here in Konoha.

Ino is with them.

...

They don't grab anyone else; they don't think to.

The closer they get to the scent, the worse it gets.

He can smell Ino's blood, and it's sending him into a blind panic.

He abandoned his teammate; he tore her down and left her.

She's bleeding now because of him.

Akamaru is keeping him from tearing off at top speed in Four Legs form, but it's a near thing.

No one else realizes the danger the blonde's in, ninja bleed all the time, and the only other person who can recognize that particular smell is Kakashi.

He doesn't smell the jonin anywhere nearby.

He's sorry; he takes it back.

There is karma.

...

The trail leads near the Yamanaka compound.

Ino had probably been on her way home.

The scent of blood is getting stronger.

...

She's right in front of them; he can smell it.

Akamaru asks him to use the Human Beast Clone technique.

He does so.

...

It's a Yamanaka townhouse that sits on the very edge of their territory.

That's where the trail ends.

There is a paper with writing that hangs on the doorknob.

"I've woken up, now I must go back to sleep"

It's written cutesy, and there is a picture of a sleeping cat drawn onto it.

He stuffs it into his jacket and then kicks down the door.

...

There is a silhouette standing above a motionless form.

He dodges the senbon thrown, and Akamaru goes for the throat.

He snarls as the man manages to kick Akamaru away, but it's soundless.

Passing Fang barely misses; he hits the floor behind his opponent.

The enemy brings their hand up in a familiar hand sign, and he throws himself out of the way.

The enemy tries again, and he barely manages to dodge.

He's struggling to keep his Four Legs Technique under control, and he's fighting against a well-trained Yamanaka.

Ino's either unconscious or dead, and there are silencing seals running.

No one knows he's here; no one knows \_Ino\_ is here.

He can't-

Akamaru lands next to him and punches him in the jaw. The ninken goes after their enemy and lands a well-placed kick.

Akamaru is undoubtedly growling at him for being stupid even if he can't hear it.

He bites himself and breathes.

It's enough.

He can't worry about Ino right now, he's got to figure out what he needs to do.

Akamaru can't distract their opponent for much longer, soâ€¦|

He either needs to bring the enemy down himself, together with Akamaru, or find another way.



It's hard to think with this much silence.

Where, he wonders, are the seals at.

He closes his eyes and breathes; ink, he smells ink.

They're in the walls.

He opens his eyes and smirks. He has an idea.

...

Passing Fang is a purely destructive technique. Given enough power, it can take on anything.

It can most certainly take down walls.

He rips through them as they weren't even there.

He follows the smell of ink, and keeps his Passing Fang going like a miniature tornado.

The Yamanaka doesn't figure out what he's doing until it's too late.

Sound returns, and Akamaru howls.

...

The roof comes down, and he makes sure to destroy the falling debris around Ino.

It's loud and noisy; dust flies everywhere.

It's perfect.

...

"You don't know what you're doing!" The man yells.

Akamaru and he don't even bother paying attention as they keep aiming at the Yamanaka with Fang Passing Fang.

They've cornered the man in the backyard and don't give him an inch.

They're not trying to kill him.

They're stalling for time while keeping him from using his mind jutsu.

"Konoha is counting on us!" He screams.

He almost falters, but reminds himself quickly that Yamanaka are known for their mind techniques and psychological prowess.

Nothing can justify having \_ozone, death, and hatred\_ seeped into their couches.

Nothing can justify attacking a girl on her way home.

He's going to pay, and his own family will be the ones to sentence him.

...

Five Yamanaka, two Nara, and three unknown ninja show up.

It's like the beginning to a joke.

Akamaru and he can't stop using Fang Passing Fang as a fence because-

"He hurt the heiress, he's attacking me, why are you just standing there!" The man shouts.

A Yamanaka is running medical jutsu over Ino's prone form, pale-faced and determined. A Nara stands by his side while the other Nara is examining the collapsed house with a thoughtful expression.

Two of the Yamanaka have run off for backup, and the rest are trying to figure out what to do.

The confused ninja are ready to rush them when the Nara standing next to Ino speaks up.

"She's not dead. You're not dead. Odd isn't it?" He drawls lazily.

He almost halts his technique; Ino's alive.

She's alive.

It's a relief; he hasn't failed yet.

"What? No! Just help me!" The man demands, desperation oozing off of him.

"She appears to be knocked out with a Yamanaka technique." The one healing her says grimly, "I can reverse it."

An accusing silence falls over them.

He could care less about the silent conversations going on; he's getting dizzy. Can they hurry this up?

"How about," the other Nara suggests in the same lazy drawl, "we wake her up, so she can point the finger."

The man pales, and both Nara's eyes glint in satisfaction.

...

Ino wakes up with a groan.

She gapes at the scene around them.

The Yamanaka next to her very gently asks her what happened.

Ino is quiet for a moment and then reaches down to her

thigh.

"Where's my kunai pouch? I want to stab him myself!" She hisses while seething.

"Kiba!" She hollers, "Don't you dare kill him! I want to do it!"

The Yamanaka's eyebrows almost hit his hairline.

...

Akamaru and he can finally stop spinning. His stomach is having trouble settling, but it's satisfying to see the man dragged off.

They have to restrain Ino from charging after him with a kunai.

They're looking at a hospital trip and an interrogation.

Oddly enough, Ino won't let go of his hand.

...

He tells them everything.

Their temporary partnership, their fight, the scent Akamaru and he picked up that sent him into a blind frenzy, all of it.

He's not one for lying, and there's no real reason to.

He doesn't mention the paper still tucked away in his jacket.

...

They try to wrangle him into staying in the hospital for chakra observation.

He doesn't let them win.

He's had a long day, he's tired and emotionally drained; he's going home.

Then Ino asks for him, and he throws his hands up in defeat.

...

"You okay for visitors?" He questions.

Ino is pale, and the smell of blood is gone.

She looks exhausted.

"Yeah," she says quietly, "just wanted to say thanks."

She hesitates before saying,

"And that I'm sorry."

He blinks in surprise. He did not expect that.

"I'm sorry for calling you useless, Akamaru." She tells the ninken.

Akamaru gives an accepting bark.

He closes his eyes and sighs. He has his own apology to make.

"No, I'm the one who's sorry." He tells her, "I abandoned you."

"But I'm the one that ran off!" She says puzzled.

"That shouldn't have stopped me." He tells her, "I'm better than that."

Teammates do not abandon each other.

He's going to brand it into his soul.

"Better than me, huh?" Ino says with a grimace.

"I didn't mean it like that." He tells her quietly.

She's silent for a moment.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. It's just-well. I acted so stuck up, and you still came for me." She says shyly.

It's reserved, but she's smiling.

It's much better than the screeching from before.

"Of course, what are temporary teammates for?" He grins.

"Maybe some apples?" She asks, eyes wide and pleading.

He laughs.

"I'll go get some."

...

They're both munching on apple slices, and Akamaru is lounging on Ino's bed when she speaks up.

"So."

"So." He says back in amusement.

"Hey, I'm trying to say something here!" She scowls.

"So?" He asks teasingly.

Ino crosses her arms, huffing and pretends to be annoyed. She breaks it when she lets out a laugh.

"Alright, alright!" She says, "I just wanted to tell you something. It's kind of personal."

He motions that he's listening.

"When I was three," she says not looking at him, "I developed a split personality."

He almost chokes on his apple piece.

"I don't know why! Some think it's due to messing around with techniques before I could comprehend it, but that's not-it's not." She struggles.

"She called herself Abby and kept trying to convince me I wasn't real. It was-it was rough. It got to the point that the clan decided she needed to go." Ino says rubbing her forehead.

"So they erased her."

...

He needs a moment, otherwise he's going to do something rash.

Akamaru, his amazing partner, has him covered.

The ninken distracts Ino by demanding pets, and he tries to center himself.

He fights the urge to run to Sakura.

...

"Why are you telling me this?" He asks once he's sure he's got himself under control.

"When Ak-"she pauses, "-that man cornered me, he kept asking me about her. He didn't seem to believe me when I told him she was gone."

"I trusted him for tea." She says grimacing, "When I realized something was up, he tried to get me to stay so he "could check\_.\_""

"I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come." She says softly.

She hasn't stopped petting Akamaru, and she won't look him in the eye.

He kind of wishes he killed the bastard.

...

He talks the staff into letting him stay past visiting hours.

He leaves Akamaru with Ino while he grabs some food.

It's when he's juggling take-out for three that he runs into Yamanaka Inoichi.

The man stares him down, and he can't help but remember the words

"erased her."

It echoes like a bad memory.

After a long moment, her father hands him a pink peony and warns him not to try anything.

He blinks in confusion as the man walks away.

...

"I guess I just can't understand it." She admits.

He tilts his head in a silent question.

"You," she points to Akamaru, "him. Your clan. Everything."

She blows out a breath, and looks down at her hands.

"All my life I've heard about the wild Inuzukas, people who might as well be animals. Konoha's best trackers, but not someone you want on your team."

She looks him dead in the eye.

Her eyes are bright, intense, and blue.

Blue, very blue.

"They're wrong." She tells him resolutely, "You're different, but you're people."

"And I couldn't have asked for a better temporary teammate." She says smiling.

"Akamaru too." She adds, looking at the ninken.

Something inside of him warms.

(Comrades)

...

He leaves when Ino drifts off.

His own bed is calling him.

Akamaru's already asleep in his arms.

He curses when he remembers they never completed their training exercise.

...

Tap. Tap. Tap.

He wishes his dreams would quit aggravating him.

Tap. TapTapTap.

It makes it hard to sleep. Can't he ever just have peaceful rest?

"Oi, Kiba."

Dreamless sleep, is that too much to ask?

"\_Kiba!\_"

He also wishes Sakura would quit haunting him. It's not like he can't just go see her.

"KIBA, WAKE UP!"

He rolls out of bed, hitting the dresser.

...

The sun is out, and there is unfortunately no food.

Akamaru refuses to leave his comfortable spot on the bed.

He doesn't get that luxury. He kind of wishes he stayed at the hospital.

"So," Sakura says once she's sure he's not suffering from chakra exhaustion, "what were you thinking?"

She's giving him a bright smile, and he knows she's livid.

He's walking into a minefield he doesn't know how to navigate.

"I had to rescue Ino?" He guesses.

It's the wrong thing to say; she hits him in the shoulder hard.

"I was right there!" She screams at him, "You could have gotten me!"

"I," he struggles to put his feelings into words, "kind of wasn't thinking."

She gives him a hooded stare, and he can feel himself sweating.

"Seriously," he tries, "I didn't even think of you."

She cracks her knuckles ominously.

"I was this close to going feral. I didn't think of anything at the time!" He backpedals.

It works, and the Sakura-shaped bomb is diffused.

"What do you mean? You really lost it?" She asks worriedly.

He sighs, and tells her what he can.

(There is no mention of erasure)

...

"Huh." She says tapping her lips, "Guess I know why I've been chased by the Yamanaka all morning.

"You're being harassed?" He asks with a frown.

"Oh no," she denies, "they just keep trying to find out how you're doing. It's kind of what made me think you were worse off than you actually are."

He blinks.

"How I'm doing?" He's repeats in confusion.

"Well, it's more like Ino wants to know and won't let anyone rest until they do her bidding." She admits.

Yamanaka are strange creatures, he thinks.

"Do you know how she is?" He decides to ask.

"Mhmm, I went and saw her after the fourth time I got stopped by some random Yamanaka. They're keeping her at the hospital in case something more than a knock out technique was done. The Yamanaka are over-seeing it, of course."

Her lips curl up into a smile, and her eyes are shining with mirth.

He has a bad feeling.

"Do you know," she says slowly, "Ino has declared me her rival?"

"Ah?" Is all he can say.

"Oh yes, she said, "I won't lose to you no matter \_what\_", and that "I'll become the greatest kunoichi ever, just you wait."" Sakura quotes barely keeping a straight face.

He's confused, what set this off? Ino and Sakura are strangers, aren't they?

Did he accidentally push Ino onto Sakura when he snapped?

Sakura won't tell him, but she won't stop laughing either.

...

Apparently Shino bribed his own judge, Sasuke, so that no one won.

He used tomatoes.

Sasuke caused a whole fiasco involving Naruto that made Hinata faint and Choji angry on her behalf.

Sakura was forced to intervene before buildings got



destroyed.

Shikamaru was left with the wreckage.

Shino used \_tomatoes\_. (food, red)

Shino and Sasuke have also bonded over the need for vengeance.

He's kind of worried.

...

Kurenai-sensei allows him to sit out while she makes good on her threat.

Technically, Shino did hand over his clue.

Hinata has to partake in the inhumane training session because Team 8 likes to suffer as a team. (Or so Kurenai-sensei says)

He's startled when Shikamaru and Choji swing by to provide a running commentary.

"Brutal." Shikamaru exclaims as Hinata goes flying.

"Team 8's on a different level." Choji agrees.

He wonders what their presence means.

...

He has a lot to think about.

He can't stop staring at it.

\_"I've woken up, now I must go back to sleep"\_

There was also the \_ozone, death, and hatred \_that clung to the man's furniture, but not to the man, himself.

He doesn't know if he's been handed another piece to the puzzle, or if he's reaching for something that isn't there.

He puts the paper away and lies down when Akamaru gives him a questioning bark.

He has trouble sleeping, and he dreams of Sakura being erased.

...

"He killed himself before they got anything out of him. Shredded his own brain." Ino tells him grimly.

He's walking her home from the hospital, having gotten there as she was checking out.

"He must have known what would happen to him." He tells her darkly.

A Yamanaka in Interrogation would know exactly what would become of him.

Ino lets out a shaky sigh and reaches down to pet Akamaru.

The ninken lets her, and he can't help but think they're friends now.

He thinks about what that means.

"Oi, Ino. I'm putting together something of a get-together, want to come?" He asks.

She considers it.

"Can I bring the guys?" She inquires.

"Sure, why not?"

If Shino tries to commit murder, he'll actually be fitting right in with the Inuzuka.

...

He explains to Ma and Sis what he wants to do, and they almost break his jaw in excitement.

He doesn't think he's going to get that small dinner he wants.

He sends out the invitations.

...

Tables and blankets have been set out; streamers and lanterns hang everywhere.

They've got pigs and deer roasting. Vegetables are being steamed, and it's positively mouth-watering.

The cooks are having to fight off the ones who "just want a taste", and the sounds of fights breaking out are practically background music.

There's plenty of alcohol too.

The Inuzuka know what it means to throw a party, and though he just wanted an informal dinner, this is pretty good too.

Sakura arrives first, bringing her own thermos of tea. (She's been around long enough to know better)

He leaves her by herself when he goes to meet Shino and Hinata at the edge of the compound.

They're his most important guests. He needs to escort them personally.

Only a handful of clan members try to bother them, and a quick beat down takes care of that.

Akamaru lets Hinata carry him and hurls death threats at any ninken that come too close.

Shino and Hinata follow him to the main event area tense and unsure. They're unused to the sheer amount of people, dogs, and noise.

He'll just have to keep bringing them over until they are.

When he gets back, he sees Sakura surrounded by young Inuzuka filled with confidence and hormones.

She's completely relaxed, but there's an annoyed look on her face.

He sighs and cracks his knuckles.

...

Kurenai-sensei shows up, escorting Team 10 like requested.

He makes sure they know where to sit and leaves them to it.

Kurenai-sensei has a fixed smile on her face as she's forced to deal with Sakura's would-be-suitors.

Ino falters only for a moment before she's flittering around, asking questions and demanding answers with an innocent expression.

The cousins she's currently hounding seem bewildered and insecure. They've never had to put up with a Yamanaka. (Couldn't happen to better people, he smirks)

Shikamaru has sprawled out onto a blanket, and Choji seems to be stress eating.

The curious clan children who keep eyeing them will ensure they don't get left out.

He keeps his teammates close as a precaution.

He's made sure to let every single person know what would happen if they bother Shino and Hinata, but it's better to prevent it in the first place.

Hinata hangs onto Akamaru like he's a stuffed animal, and Shino keeps throwing Choji dirty looks.

He tells him to either pick a fight or quit it.

This is a party; throw a punch or knock back some alcohol.

The only ones left to arrive are-

Naruto's loud voice cuts through the noise, and he just knows the blond has said something to piss off his relatives.

A fireball goes streaming through the air, and he leaves his teammates under the care of Sakura.

Akamaru and he have to go grab two idiots.

...

Before they can eat, they must have the celebratory drink.

Ma takes her place at the center table; Sis is next to her on her left.

He takes his seat on her right and makes Sakura sit on his other side.

He's carefully placed Kurenai-sensei, Team 7, Team 8, and Team 10 near the center.

He doesn't know if they realize the real reason for the party, but he's not going to show disrespect.

The clan is watching, and Ma holds up her sake dish.

"May our lives be lived, may we forever have our partners, and may we keep our kin close!" She roars.

The clan roars back, and all but the youngest knocks back a cup.

It tastes terrible. He's not too fond of sake, but it'd be a disaster to refuse.

The moment is over and everyone's turned their attention to eating.

He takes a breath and stands.

It's now or never.

"Oi!" He yells.

No one pays attention, he's not loud enough.

"OI!" He tries again.

Only a few clan members look at him, and a sharp feeling of irritation shoots through him.

"HEY YOU MAGGOTS! SIT DOWN AND SHUT UP FOR A MOMENT, I'VE GOT SOMETHING TO SAY!" He screams.

Everyone stops what they're doing and watch him with unnerving eyes.

They sit back down.

He bangs a fist onto the table and declares,

"I'M GOING TO BE CLAN HEIR, ANYONE GOT A PROBLEM WITH IT?"

...

Only three people, one aunt, and two cousins, fight him for it.

It's more out of obligation than because they don't think him fit.

Akamaru and he don't lose.

His clan's been waiting for this announcement for years; he kind of feels bad for leaving them hanging for so long.

Sakura, his wonderful friend, patches them up with only a teasing, "Guess I'll need to swear another oath, huh?"

Ma throws back her head and lets out a soul-rendering howl; Kuromaru goes next.

One by one, the rest of the clan joins in. Akamaru and he go last, and it feels incredible.

Their howls can be heard throughout all of Konoha, he's willing to bet.

There are hard days coming up, but tonight is a joyous occasion he can share with the people he loves.

He's going to keep moving towards the future, and he's going to do it with his comrades by his side.

Together, he knows, they can overcome anything.

## 5. With No Regrets 1

"I've got it!" Hinata shouts.

"Good! Don't let it get away!" He barks.

"It's getting away." Sasuke says, annoyed.

"Over here, Hinata! We'll get it together!" Sakura calls out to her.

"Hey, hey! Watch me, I'll get it!"

The sound of glass breaking echoes through the forest.

"NARUTO!" They scream.

...

Sunglasses glint at him in despair, and he winces.

"Sorry, Shino. Your butterfly flew away. It was unholy in how fast that thing was." He tells him.

He'd never seen a bug move that fast.

"I can't believe it managed to evade all of us." Sakura says in disbelief.

It also somehow knew evasion techniques.

"Geh." Sasuke spits.

Has to hurt the Uchiha pride, he thinks, to be unable to catch a butterfly in a net.

"U-Um, sorry. I thought I had it, butâ€¦" Hinata says looking down.

He pats her on the shoulder; she did her best.

"Yeah, that was totally a bug from hell!" Naruto pipes up.

"You don't get to say anything. You're the one that broke the container. You also managed to shred our nets at the same time." Sakura says through gritted teeth.

"It's not like any of you were gonna catch it!" Naruto shoots back.

Well, he has a point.

"Oi, let's just go get dinner. Shino, Akamaru and I remember what it smells like. We'll go find it tomorrow, alright?" He offers.

Shino gives him a shallow nod, and he knows the Aburame is still upset.

"Ichiraku's!" Naruto shouts, bouncing.

Sakura sighs,

"Again?"

"That moron will end up with noodles for a brain." Sasuke scoffs.

"U-Um, Ichiraku's soundsâ€¦good?" Hinata questions.

"Yeah, fine." He agrees.

Akamaru barks.

"Akamaru says next time, he's picking the place."

...

He stares at himself, and thinks, this is so awesome.

His clone grins back and waves goodbye before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Forty seconds.

He grins as the memories of waving at himself fill his head.

He'll have the Three-Headed Wolf transformation yet.

...

His palms are sweaty, and he can feel his eyes narrow.

Ino sits across from him.

He has to be able to do this; he can't stall any longer.

"So I heard we're about to have a bunch of outsiders in the village." She says.

Ino eyes are studying the table between them.

"Yeah?" He asks as he avoids looking at her.

He decides to roll the dice.

They almost bump heads to get a look.

"Hah! Looks like you're going back to Iwa!" Ino shouts.

"Man, I just got out of there." He groans as he moves his piece down the board.

He's never going to leave it at this rate.

"I'm going to be in Konoha before you." Ino taunts.

"Can't you guys go play sugoroku somewhere else?" Shikamaru grunts.

The Nara is lying on the floor next to them, and Akamaru's hovering over him.

He's probably aggravated because they forced their way into his house, and Akamaru licks him every time he tries to sleep.

Ino and he share a look.

"Nope!" They chirp.

"Troublesome." Shikamaru groans.

"So, outsiders?" He prompts.

"Yeah," she says looking down at the dice in concern, "we're hosting the promoting test for genin-"

"Chunin Exams." Shikamaru interrupts from the floor.

"-Chunin Exams," Ino continues shooting Shikamaru a glare, "in Konoha. I overheard a few people talking about it. Most people are betting on Sasuke to be the final winner."

A dreamy smile forms on her face as she coos,

"Of course my Sasuke will win, there's no way he can lose."

She rolls the dice and lands on the path to go to Konoha.

"Troublesome." He decides.

...

"Oi, Sakura," he tells her over dinner, "Ino told me we're hosting the Chunin Exams."

This is the wrong thing to say at the wrong time.

She spits hot tea into his face, knocks the rest onto Akamaru, and her chopsticks hit him in the head as she struggles to stand.

Akamaru lets out a yelp, she sprints for the door, and he's left wiping tea out of his eyes.

He doesn't realize his sleeve has sauce on it until he feels the burn.

There can't be worse dinners than this one, he thinks as Ma and Sis laugh at him.

...

"You want what?" He asks flatly.

Hinata is fidgeting and poking her fingers; Shino's giving him stare number five, "You heard me."

"The Hyuuga formally invites the newly declared Inuzuka's heir to dine with them." Hinata repeats.

"Father wishes to meet the other genin on my team." Hinata says shyly.

"I, too, wish to extend a formal invitation. Why? Because the Aburame clan wishes to acknowledge the Inuzuka's heir while simultaneously holding a meeting session with a teammate." Shino says once Hinata falls silent.

He stares at them before sharing a look with Akamaru.

This going to end terribly; he just knows it.

...

"Alright, maybe if we use a Shadow Clone?" He asks, "I know it only lasts a minute, but that's all I'll need to tell them to bite me."

Akamaru sighs.

"You're right. I can't make a clone for you too." He says nodding to himself.

"Maybe you should just be polite?" Sakura says not looking up from her medical book.

Polite to the Hyuuga? Obviously Sakura has gone off the deep end.

Though, he recognized that the moment she told him, with the weirdest



smile, "It's just rumors. The Chunin Exams couldn't possibly be coming up."

"Your mother will know what to do." He decides already heading for the door.

"She'll just tell you to buy fruit." Sakura says dully from her bed.

He winces.

Polite it is.

...

Dinner with the Hyuuga goes better than expected.

...

The Hyuuga clan grounds are wholly traditional and serene. Hyuuga clan members seem to ghost through the corridors, reserved and restrained.

He decides he hates it immensely.

It's a struggle to maintain a polite demeanor thanks to the dining placements.

Akamaru sits next to him, denied his own plate, and pretending he can't understand what's going on around him.

It's a slap in the face, but they both knew it would happen.

Akamaru wants to hold off causing a scene because of Hinata. It's the only reason he lets it go.

Dinner is quiet and uncomfortable; Hinata keeps her head down, and her sister gives him disdainful looks when she thinks he can't see.

Aside from his teammate, every Hyuuga here keeps belittling him; it's getting on his nerves.

"You are remarkably composed." Hyuuga Hiashi tells him.

You're not behaving like an animal like the rest of your people, is what is being said.

"Usually, the Inuzuka like to show how," he pauses, "sincere their feelings are."

He bares his fangs in response.

"I'm trying to make this painless for Hinata's sake, but if you want, I can show you how sincere we like to be."

It's not an idle threat.

Akamaru is stiff beside him, ready to show the Hyuuga the true Inuzuka spirit.

He's only trying so hard because Hinata is giving him those wounded animal looks.

He does not need to bow to anyone.

Once Hinata becomes clan head, none of this formal setting will be needed anyways.

"I'm surprised you're able to able to understand Hinata's position." The Hyuuga says in disbelief.

...

If that had been the end of it, dinner would have probably ended on a quiet, terse note.

...

"It's hard on her to have someone of your heritage as a teammate. Most never realize their own behavior." Hiashi adds somberly.

"Oh?" He says.

He looks to the ceiling in thought and hums.

"Oi, Akamaru, let's show them our sincere gratitude for the meal."

Akamaru doesn't hesitate to jump on the table, and he gives the startled Hyuuga a fanged grin.

The only person he cares about around this table is Hinata; since she'll be clan head, they'll have no trouble forming an alliance in the future.

If she doesn't, then there's no point in being friendly.

(And if she winds up with the caged bird seal, he's going to kill every single Main House Hyuuga until it doesn't matter anymore; it's been decided)

...

They tell him to never come back.

Politely.

It totally went better than he thought it would.

...

Dinner with the Aburame isâ€|well.

...

"Oi." He says.

He regrets it when a legion of sunglasses zero in on him.

"I would just like to, er, apologize now in case I doâ€|something to offend?" He expresses weakly.

"Noted." Aburame Shibi states.

The sunglasses don't stop staring at him, and he can feel himself sweating.

The meal continues on in silence.

Shino is incredibly unhelpful and offers no cues. He's completely silent; no familiar hum comes from his bugs.

Even at Shino's quietest, he can normally hear the movement of the kikaichu. It's disconcerting not to hear it at all.

Akamaru nudges him. The ninken is also disturbed.

No one is making a noise; there's no talking, no sound of kikaichu, or even rustling of movement.

It's getting to him.

He breaks.

"Alright, I can't take it anymore."

The sunglasses seem to stare into his soul.

"Sorry Shino, but the silence is killing me. Buzz will you?" He demands.

He expects Shino's "You're an embarrassment" stare; to his confusion, Shino seems to be giving his "I told you so" stare to his father.

"You do not mind our insects?" Shibi asks, lowering his chopsticks.

He stares at the man.

"Why would I? I mean, your kikaichu are like our ninken. They're you're precious partners right?" He asks, confused.

He doesn't understand the question.

Are they pretending their kikaichu don't exist?

"If you're making them hide, stop it. I'd never make Akamaru pretend he wasn't important." He states firmly.

Akamaru reminds him about the Hyuuga dinner.

"You were the one who said to not be offended! That's not my fault." He argues.

Akamaru tells him he's remembering wrong.

"I am not!"

Wrong, Akamaru barks.

"You said you wanted to make sure Hinata's feelings weren't hurt." He growls.

Akamaru scoffs at him.

His chopsticks go flying as he recounts to his hard-headed partner exactly what happened.

"Kiba."

He stops.

Shino's looking at him with that disapproving stare, he just knows it.

He remembers where he's at and winces.

"Sorry." He mutters.

The ninken laughs, and he has to grit his teeth from responding.

When he turns back to his meal, he realizes he has nothing to eat with.

He stares at his plate in dismay; if he was eating with his family, they wouldn't care if he ate with his hands, but he's not.

It's a crazy concept, but he actually does have to pretend he's civilized.

He blinks when a pair of new chopsticks descends from the heavens to hover in front of him.

He takes them, and the kikaichu return back to Shino.

"Thanks." He grins.

Shino nods back, buzzing.

He breaks his chopsticks, and the rest of the table breaks out into a hum.

The silence disappears.

...

He thinks it went well, but he's not completely sure.

Aburame are weird.

He'll probably dream about drowning in sunglasses later.

...

"Very good." Kurenai-sensei says looking them over with a pleased expression,

"You've all done wonderfully. I couldn't have asked for better students."

He lifts an eyebrow.

"Really, sensei?" He asks incredulously.

"Hinata just kicked me to the Land of Wind and back." He says holding up his tenketsu-blocked arms.

Hinata's giving him a regretful look, but he knows better.

Hinata, the weak Hyuuga heiress? Nope, she's completely hardcore; she'll kick your ass while apologizing for not being sorry.

Shino's buzzing at him in amusement, the bastard.

"It would have gone differently had I allowed you to use Akamaru." Kurenai-sensei tells him, lips quirking up.

"You mean she would have only kicked me out of the gates?" He asks deadpan.

Akamaru barks out a reminder: Hinata adores the ninken; she would have only gone after him even harder to avoid hurting Akamaru.

Other side of Land of Earth, at least, the ninken says.

He's right of course.

"Hinata, remove the blocks, please." Kurenai-sensei requests.

Once he regains the chakra circulation in arms, Kurenai-sensei gestures for their attention.

"I have something for you to consider." Kurenai-sensei tells them.

She gives them a serious look.

"In two days the Chunin Exams will begin. I have the utmost confidence in each of you. If you wish to take part, I will nominate you."

She pauses a moment.

"I understand if you don't think you're ready," Kurenai-sensei says, "but since Konoha is hosting, this is a good chance to see where you stand."

She's waits for their answers, and all he can think is, \_two days\_.

He glances at Hinata and Shino.

Hinata's eyes are wide, but she smells calm.

Shino's gone quiet in thought; he smells like confidence.

He waits for their nods and takes a breath.

Two days before it begins.

Akamaru tells him to get on with it.

"Team 8's entering." He tells his teacher confidently.

He grins.

"We're going to be awesome."

...

Once the day's training ends, he decides to seek out Sakura.

He figures Kakashi will follow the normal pattern and spring it on Team 7 at the last minute.

The last thing Sakura needs is to break down in front of her teacher.

"Say what." Sakura says flatly.

He winces.

Akamaru has decided he wants no part of this conversation and is hiding behind him.

"Just thought you might like the heads up." He tells her.

She grabs him by the jacket and shakes.

"Are you telling me I don't even have time to panic about this?" She yells

"I think you're panicking right now." He points out helpfully.

She's giving him the crazy eyes; he can feel her grip tightening on his collar.

"You know," he tries, "It might not be so bad. I'm told most of the competition are entering Konoha today. I haven't heard of any genin causing trouble."

She doesn't say anything.

"We can go check them out?" He tries again.

Sakura opens her mouth, closes it, and sighs.

"Fine." She says in defeat.

Her shoulders slump, and she lets go of him.

Akamaru asks if it's safe yet, and he gives the ninken a dirty look.

...

"That's a lot of ninja." Sakura says weakly.

He frowns.

She's right; it is.

There's no way he can keep track of them all either.

Genin teams are entering with their jonin-sensei, and he can see ninja from Sand, Rain, Waterfall, Grass, and-

He can't find the team from Sound.

His eyes rove over the foreign ninja pouring through the gate, but he doesn't see what he's looking for.

He doesn't know if he would have been able to memorize Orochimaru's scent with all the distortion anyway.

...

He's stunned when Sakura doesn't wake him in the middle of the night.

It's surprising, but-

She must have everything under control for once, he tries telling himself.

(Unfortunately he knows her too well; he knows she's running away)

...

Training finishes early; Kurenai-sensei wants them well-rested.

Hinata's currently telling Akamaru about something her sister's done, and he's having a strangely interesting conversation with Shino over the benefits of ants, when Sakura barrels into him.

Her smell of fear is almost overpowering.

"KibaKibaKiba." She babbles, clutching his arm.

She's pale and touching him. Not good, he thinks.

A spike of his own fear goes through him, and he searches her for injuries.

He doesn't smell anything, but maybe-

"What?" He asks when he can't find anything.

"I met him." She says fearfully, "He's going to kill us all."

Ah, he knows exactly who she's referring to.

"Alright, alright. Take a deep breath." He tells her, "Did it go exactly how you thought it would, or was it different?"

"It wentâ€"It went differently, but only by a bit. I mean, I didn't chaseâ€"it was just the words. Everything else went according toâ€"how I thought it would." She says shakily.

She buries her head in his shoulder.

"He's a monster."

Shino's watching them with furrowed eyebrows, and Hinata's looking at them with worry.

He motions the Hyuuga over.

Hinata doesn't waste time and offers a timid hug. Sakura latches onto the other girl like she's dying.

Meeting a demon is never easy, he thinks.

...

He decides to go buy some dango and leaves Sakura in the care of his teammates.

He trusts them; neither of them will try to pry, and they're both fond of her.

He can't do much for Sakura, but comfort food is universal no matter what life you live.

...

He doesn't make it to the dango stand.

There are three Ame ninja looking at him in contempt and disgust.

They smell of rain and a special wax.

"What you looking at, mutt?" The girl of the team sneers.

His eyes narrow.

Rain ninja are notorious for their short, violent tempers, but-

"You were staring me down first." He says baring his teeth.

Akamaru's watching them stiff, eyes unmoving.

There's something about these three that have the ninken's hackles going.

"Maybe it's because you're such an eyesore, dog." The boy to her left jeers.

He growls, and Akamaru lets out a warning bark.

"Face markings: red. Eyes: close to slits. Animal partner: ninken. This boy: Inuzuka." The other boy cites.



He stares them down.

All three of them are wearing rebreathers, one of the boys is carrying a tank of water on his back, and the other two are carrying umbrellas.

They look like typical ninja from Ame, but there's just something about them that rubs him the wrong way.

The two boys smell like the typical beginner-level chunin, but the girl doesn't.

Ah, there's the rub; he can't smell her power at all.

He keeps his fangs bared.

"You're not exactly an outstanding looker yourself," he pauses before grinning, "ugly."

The short, squat boy to the girl's left stiffens.

"What did you just call me?" The Rain ninja asks angrily.

"You heard me." He says still baring his teeth.

"I'm gonna-"

"Enough." The girl says firmly, "You will not fight until I say so. Head back to the room, Shinta. Yasuhiro, make sure this idiot doesn't do anything stupid."

The taller boy with the water tank nods to her.

"But Takara, he-" Shinta starts.

"No buts. Move it." Takara says with a glare.

The boy, Shinta, throws him a dirty look, but doesn't argue when his teammate grabs him by the arm and pulls him away.

He doesn't watch them leave; he keeps his eyes on the true threat.

The girl looks at him coldly, and he studies her in return.

Truly, her appearance isn't anything special compared to the other Rain ninja, but there's one thing that stands out.

There's a scratched out etching on her rebreather.

He's not sure why, but it's pulling his eyes to it.

It almost looks likeâ€

"Inuzuka, keep out of my way, and I'll keep out of yours." She says breaking his thought.

"If I don't?" He asks challenging.

"Then I will not hesitate to kill you." She says before turning

away.

He watches her leave and doesn't move until Akamaru no longer smells her.

...

He barely remembers the dango; Akamaru has to remind him.

He knows he's worrying his teammates and Sakura with his muted actions, but it's not something he can help.

Something inside of him is shifting in unrest; something not even Akamaru fully understands.

The ninken can sense something wrong, and that's all that really matters.

...

His uneasiness doesn't go away even when he should be sleeping.

He can't decide whether it's because of the unsettling Rain ninja, or his own worries about the Chunin Exams.

He stares at the paper running a thumb over the ink.

He hasn't forgotten that someone besides Orochimaru is targeting Sasuke.

It's just a matter of waiting for something to break.

The worst part is that almost every single person is watching the last Uchiha because of the Exams.

Friends, foes, and bystanders all have something riding on a boy they've never met.

All eyes are on Sasuke, and it's bothering him.

Akamaru manages to convince him to rest, and he dreams about drowning in a rain of tears.

...

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

He slowly opens his eyes and groans into the pillow.

Tap Tap-Tap-Tap-Tap-Tap-Tap-Tap-Tap-

"Oi," he growls at the window, "I'm getting up. I'm getting up."

Akamaru whines, but he grabs the ninken anyway.

If he has to suffer, so does his partner.

...

Same park, same bench, same starry sky, but no snacks.

Damn it, he thinks.

Sakura sits next to him, gripping her arms in a parody of a self-hug.

She hasn't said anything, but her pale face speaks volumes.

"So." He says.

Akamaru hides under the bench when her reply is to let out a loud wail.

"So," he says once she's finished, "you haven't made up your mind, then?"

She lets out a warbled hissing noise.

He's impressed; it's a new "Sakura thinks the world is ending" sound.

"I kept trying to get you to think about it." He tells her irritably.

She gives him a teary look, and he feels most of his irritation fade away.

"Everything'll be fine." He sighs.

She flinches.

"Seriously, you're strong, your teammates are strong, and," he says teasingly, "Akamaru wouldn't let anything happen to you."

Akamaru barks his agreement from under the bench.

"So?" He asks calmly.

She opens her mouth, closes it, and then-

"What do I do?" Sakura wails.

"Well, first off, what do you want to do?" He questions.

The glare she's giving him is striking.

"I wouldn't be asking that if I knew." She hisses.

"What's going to happen is going to happen whether you like it or not," he says slowly, "but that doesn't mean you have to do something you don't want to do. You could even hide away until it's over, if you like."

She bows her head, but her shoulders are stiff.

"That's not an option." She whispers.

He smirks.

"Then you know what you want to do. Now figure out what you're going to do."

She's quiet for a moment.

"What I want to do, doesn't necessarily mean what I'm going to do." She says trying to work it out.

"What I should do is let things play out so that everyone comes out of it alive." She pauses and looks to the sky.

"But?" He prompts when she doesn't continue.

"But that's not something I'm going to do." She finishes, "It's not something I can do."

"Well, you're narrowing it down." He tells her.

She gives him a wobbly smile.

...

She leaves still thinking, but there are no longer tears in her eyes.

He counts it as a win.

Akamaru doesn't come out from under the bench until she's gone, the coward.

...

He's on his way to the Aburame clan grounds when he smells it.

It's a unique smell he's been forced to memorize; the scent of a stupid bug from hell.

Akamaru, who feels the sting of failure, wants to go after it.

Why not, he thinks.

Shino's not actually expecting him, and the bug-user will be ecstatic if he manages to capture the damn thing.

Akamaru lets out a confident bark, and they follow the trail to a nearby training zone.

A butterfly with beautiful blue wings rests on a flower; it's rather big for its kind, and its wings are gently moving.

Bug from hell, he thinks.

He splits up with Akamaru; the ninken is going to chase it towards him.

Their tactic works, and the butterfly is directly in front of

him.

"Gotcha!" He says bringing his hands together.

The butterfly swerves at the last moment, and flutters past him.

"No, wait! Come back here!" He yells at it.

The butterfly zips away at an incredible speed.

"Oi, did you hear me? Shino still gets depressed whenever you're brought up!" He says while chasing after it.

...

Akamaru and he chase it further into the training grounds, and his hand just barely grazes the stupid bug-

He dodges the chakra threads aiming for his fingers.

His nails dig into the ground, ready to launch himself forward; Akamaru is next to him prepared to do the same.

"Pft, a dog-boy chasing after butterflies. Now I've seen everything." A face painted purple smirks down at him.

The black-clothed figure is lazily swirling chakra threads around Shino's butterfly, keeping it trapped in his palm.

There's no mistaking it; Kankuro stands before him.

He smells like sand, wood, loathing, and fear.

He narrows his eyes.

"Oi, let it go." He growls.

Akamaru lets out his own irritated bark.

"How about, no?" Kakuro says still smirking.

He watches the butterfly hovering over the Sand ninja's hand and grits his teeth in frustration.

"Just why are you here, Sand?" He asks.

"Chunin Exams, or are you too stupid to understand that?" Kankuro mocks.

He bares his fangs.

"You're not very bright. I'm asking why you're not with your team. Running from your brother?" He taunts.

"Keh, what do you know?" The Suna ninja snarls.

"Friends of mine ran into your team. I'm told you like to pick on kids, but can't stand up to your teammate." He says with his own smirk.

Nothing but a bully, he remembers Sakura telling him.

The still entrapped butterfly does nothing but reinforce Sakura's impression.

"You're the Kazekage's kids, right? So that makes him," he pauses in a mockery of thought, "your little brother. You're scared of your own brother. Ouch." He says as Kankuro twitches.

He can smell the loathing getting stronger; it makes him grin.

"Do you want to die? I can help you out if you do." Kankuro says reaching for the puppet on his back.

Akamaru, already tense, snarls.

As much as he wants to show this bastard the meaning of agony

"I'd love to shove your face into the ground, but it'll trouble my teammates." He tells him.

He doesn't want to be barred for killing a participant beforehand. (Being immediately executed for killing the son of the Kazekage would be bad too)

"I'll come find you in the Chunin Exams and kick your ass." He promises.

Kankuro halts immediately.

He removes his hand from the bandages hiding Karasu; his other hand is still keeping the butterfly in place.

His smell has

"You're a genin?" Kankuro asks with narrow eyes, "Looks like I don't need to waste the effort to kill you after all. Do you think Gaara will let you live?"

His own eyes narrow; why has the other ninja's aggression stopped?

"Threats like that won't stop me from fighting against either of you as a ninja of Konoha." He responds.

Something in this conversation has changed; it's unsettling.

"You really think you can fight against Gaara and live? Against me? Moron." Kankuro scoffs.

Despite the Sand ninja's words, he doesn't smell the arrogance.

"I've got something to fight for." He tells him.

He thinks of dogs, green eyes, the color white, and the sound of bugs.

"You mean die for." The puppeteer sneers.

"Man, you're really pissing me off." He scowls, "I can't die. Too many people are counting on me."

His clan, his comrades, and his country, all of them are depending on him whether they know it or not.

"Are they counting on you to protect them?" The Suna ninja derides, stilling his fingers covered in chakra threads.

The Suna ninja throws him a smirk, and quicker than he can anticipate, closes his fist, crushing Shino's butterfly.

"You couldn't protect a bug." Kankuro says cruelly.

\_You can't protect any of them\_

To Akamaru's confusion, he stops the ninken from dashing forward.

Shino will be so disappointed, he thinks.

He can't stop looking at those brilliant, blue wings twisted in the Sand ninja's fist.

Can't protect who? Sakura? His clan, his teammates, his comrades?

"You're wrong." He tells the puppeteer, something in him twisting like the butterfly.

"You're completely, utterly wrong."

He briefly wonders what his face must look like because Kankuro has stepped back and is looking at him almost in fear.

He grins his fanged grin.

"This is for Shino's bug." He says and swings.

He doesn't need to protect them; they can save themselves.

Kankuro manages to avoid getting hit in the face, but his hood goes flying.

The puppeteer takes a defensive stance and is watching him warily.

Akamaru is ready to go, but there's nothing to fight about, not really.

He knows why he was so unsettled.

This guy's like Naruto; he just doesn't get it.

He laughs.

"You think I can monitor everything these guys do? That I can protect them from all harm?" He asks.

"They've got things to protect too, you know. They have to fight for what they love, for their dreams, and for themselves. If that takes them against your brother, well, I'll just have to be there with them." He says grinning.

"You don't know Gaara! If you did, you wouldn't be saying that so casually." Kankuro tells him with a frown, not moving.

He has a point really. He knows what Gaara was on paper and ink, but he's never known the one in the flesh.

He studies the Sand ninja thoughtfully.

It's different for this guy though. He thinks he understands this Kankuro far better than he ever did.

"You're afraid of him, but you feel like you have to protect your brother from both himself and those around him, right?" He asks.

The puppeteer's face twists slightly, and he continues,

"You also feel like you have to protect others from him, especially stupid kids. You want them to fear you before they have to fear your brother."

It's all coming together, this image of the one called, "Kankuro."

"It hurts not being able to protect anyone." He states.

"You're wrong!" The other ninja shouts.

"You're just pathetic compared to Gaara." Kankuro says with a sneer, but there's no hiding that smell.

He smells of fear and loathing.

He gets it now.

"I can't always protect them, but that doesn't mean I can't try." He tells him,

"I appreciate the warning, but this isn't something I can back down from. Even if it leads to death, I've got someone I have to follow. Just like you, I have someone I have to stand beside no matter what."

He motions to Akamaru; he leaves Kankuro, who's still prepared for a fight, behind.

Maybe Sakura would like to go get a late breakfast, he muses.

He's not worried about leaving his back to the enemy; this fight was over before it even began.

They're both just trying to keep their precious person from falling off the edge; that's nothing to brawl over.

...



She agrees, but it's not quite what he had in mind.

Sakura's sitting across from him, chewing on her skewered pork.

Akamaru is sitting in between them with a piece of chicken, and he's got his own skewered chicken he's enjoying.

That's not what's strange about their meal.

"Think you're so clever hiding up there? Trying to spy?" A Suna ninja calls up to them.

"As if we'd be hiding so obviously, you jerk! We're just eating!" Sakura yells down at him, waving her skewer.

"In a tree?" The foreign ninja asks in disbelief.

"We're ninja of the Leaf." Sakura tells him seriously.

The Suna ninja buys it and walks away shaking his head about weird Konoha ninja.

Sakura flashes him a sign of victory, and he gives her his own look of disbelief.

They're totally checking out the enemy force in broad daylight.

Akamaru barks out a laugh.

"So have you decided what you're going to do?" He asks her.

"Mm, well" she says, eyes roving over the Suna ninja below them, "I haven't completely made up my mind. It's kind of scary you know."

Knowing what I know, knowing Orochimaru will be there, and knowing we might run into Gaara, she doesn't say.

They have to be careful with their words; they're completely surrounded by the enemy.

"Sasuke and Naruto are over the moon about taking it. Sasuke will probably get himself into trouble if you keep him from entering." He cautions.

Orochimaru will probably go after Sasuke even if they don't enter the Chunin Exams.

"Yeah," she says with a nervous laugh, "he's always been like that. How am I supposed to be teammates with a guy like that?"

Help me, she's silently screaming.

"Hmm," he hums to stall for time, "well, I suppose with a troubling guy like that I'd-"

He taps Akamaru and the ninken starts barking out random compliments

to Sakura; he pretends to be a normal dog that just wants attention and buys him time to think.

It's a puzzling one, really. Even if Sasuke doesn't enter, it won't stop Orochimaru, his Sound ninja, and his Leaf spies from going after him.

Actuallyâ€|

They probably won't let Sasuke turn down the Chunin Exam, no matter what Kakashi wants.

Politics are riding on this exam, Konoha wants to flaunt its power, and Sasuke wants to enter.

He'll be there even if Sakura's not. It'll just be a better showing with his actual teammates.

So then, how to go about it?

If they let things take their course, Sasuke will come out marked, but alive.

Not a good thing, he'll be marked with a piece of Orochimaru's soul. He might even betray-

He breaks his skewer in half.

No, that's unacceptable.

He takes a breath and continues thinking.

They can't face him head on; Orochimaru's on a different level, not even the Third was able to put him down.

If they try to fight by themselves, they'll lose, badly.

They're going to need help.

"Oi, Akamaru, enough, leave Sakura alone already." He says picking up the ninken.

Good job, he silently nods to his partner.

"As I was saying, the only thing I can think of is try to get your sensei to knock some sense into him."

You're going to have to go to Kakashi, he tells her.

Green eyes stare back in horror.

...

Sakura lets him know that she does not, in no way, shape, or form, want to tell Kakashi about reading a manga.

He tells her she'd be an idiot to.

Kakashi's a paranoid bastard who'd think the worst if they tried to prove their claims with knowledge of the past or present.

No, what they need is tangible proof.

He knows just where to get some.

...

"You find them yet?" She whispers urgently.

He ignores her and keeps searching.

There are over a hundred genin entering, along with their jonin-sensei. (Most of the genin aren't really genin)

Akamaru doesn't know what he's looking for and can't help; he's not sure even he can find it, in all honesty.

He doesn't tell Sakura that.

Scent after scent assault him, and he filters out the smells of home.

It's simply a matter of narrowing it down, he tells himself.

Foreign smells, he's looking for scents new to Konoha.

The ones from Suna smell of sand, the ones from Ame smell of rain and wax, Taki smells like moss, and Kusa smells like bamboo and grass.

That's not what he's looking for; he's trying to find-

Harsh chemicals and rice.

"Found them." He tells her.

...

"It'll be stupid and dangerous, it might not work," he cautions, "and he will definitely know something's up."

"Something like this might even make everything worse. We've got no guarantee it'll do anything but piss him off." He stresses.

This is a shaky plan with a lot of risk.

"But this is this only way we can convince Kakashi-sensei, right?" She asks biting her lip.

"You didn't give me much notice to think of something else." He admits.

She stares at her hands.

She takes a breath and nods.

"Let's do this, for Sasuke."

He knows Sakura is strong, but this is asking her to lose a piece of herself.

Only thing is, she'll lose more than a piece if Sasuke walks away.

"You're absolutely sure you can do this?" He demands.

She steels herself.

Green eyes bore into his.

"I can do this."

(Naruto and Sasuke are important to her, but the Uchiha has a special place in her heart; it makes him wonder)

...

"Hey, Kin. Forget about your bells again, hmm?"

"Shut up, asshole."

"Both of you shut up."

"Come on, Dosu, I was just-"

"Cease the idle chatter."

"Aw, fine." Zaku says folding his arms behind his head and closing his eyes.

He follows the sound of Kin's bells and Dosu's irritated footsteps.

"You're never any fun, hmm." Zaku complains.

He opens his eyes and opens his mouthâ€”

There's no one around him.

"Kin? Dosu? Where'd you guys go?" He asks searching.

"If you guys left me again-" The Oto ninja starts threateningly.

"Hello."

Zaku swivels around, arms up, only to come face to face with a pink-haired, little girl.

"The hell?" He mutters.

She's smiling at him, arms behind her back. There's a dog by her side.

"I'd say it was nice to meet you, but I'd be a terrible liar." She chirps, "Want to meet my friend?"

Before the Sound ninja has time to understand what's happening, he drops from his position in the tree overhead to deliver a fierce kick.

Zaku goes flying, face first, into the dirt.

"Where the hell did you come from?" The Oto ninja gets up snarling.

He growls from beside Sakura; Akamaru joins him.

"That doesn't matter." He utters, "What I want to know is: why are you going after Sasuke?"

"You were stalking him. Watching him confront Gaara." Sakura asserts.

"So what if I was?" Zaku asks mockingly.

"Then I'm going to kick your ass." He assures him.

"Pft, you think someone like you, can take on someone like me?" Zaku challenges.

"We've been trained by the best, you can't take us." Sakura boasts.

"Hah, that's what you think, girl." The Oto ninja says with scorn.

Sakura laughs.

"Unless you have someone like the Sannin in your pocket, you can't take us." She says confidently.

Time to bring it home, he thinks.

"We'd probably be shaking in our sandals if you did. Jiraiya and Tsunade? The best Konoha has," he pauses, "but not Orochimaru. That guy's just a dick-less \_bastard\_."

Hook, line, andâ€”

"What did you just say?" Zaku asks dangerously.

\_Sinker\_.

"I heard if you want to get taught by him, you'll have to perform all kinds of nasty things. Heard he likes little boys the best." Sakura says conspiringly.

He grins; she's not wrong even if it is misconstrued.

"You little-" Zaku snarls.

"You're much too old though. Someone like you wouldn't work at all. Maybe if you used genjutsu?" She says tapping her lips.

It's one insult too many; the Sound ninja lets out a scream.

"Oh that is \_it\_. You don't get to talk about Lord Orochimaru that way!"

"Lord, huh? That sounds interesting, wouldn't you say, Sakura?" He asks her with a smirk.

"Indeed it does, Kiba." She says smiling.

"Almost like you're his little \_bitch\_." He taunts.

"You're dead!" Zaku screams swinging his arms.

They jump back to avoid the rush of air; it's a distraction because the Oto ninja spins, tossing small boxes all around them.

The Sound ninja brings up his arms and laughs.

"If you think you can call for help, forget about it."

"What do you mean?" Sakura questions with a frown.

His eyes narrow as Akamaru whines; something's being emitting from those tiny boxes.

It's an irritating noise that seems to be echoing back the sounds, like a reverberation.

"Courtesy of Lord Orochimaru! No one can hear you scream if the sound can't carry." Zaku says grinning.

Oh, boy.

"You're using sound as a makeshift silencing seal." He says flatly.

"You're not getting out of this alive," Zaku threatens, "and when I'm finished I'll give what's left to your family."

He doesn't resist his urge to laugh; he laughs big and loud.

He can hear his own laughter thrown back, twisted and distorted.

His opponent messed up, big time.

"Oi, Akamaru, Sakura. Let's show him the warm Konoha greeting." He says with a smirk.

Sakura cracks her knuckles, and Akamaru lets out an excited growl.

This guy never stood a chance.

...

Zaku winds up on the ground with a senbon shoved into his neck; he's paralyzed but able to speak.

Sakura glowers down at the Sound ninja; her precision is frightening.

"Don't think you're getting away with this, hmm." The defeated ninja sneers, "My teammates have already realized something's up. When they get here, you're dead!"

"You're unexpectedly good at genjutsu, Kiba." Sakura compliments, ignoring the Oto ninja entirely.

"Unexpected? That hurts. I'm Kurenai-sensei's star pupil." He tells her.

"Kurenai-sensei must have had to beat it into your head." She teases.

"Hey! Did you hear me? Once Kin and Dosu arrive, there'll be nothing left!" Zaku screams from the ground.

He smirks down at the Sound ninja.

"Not if they think you're getting in some last minute alone time." He says mockingly.

"What?" He chokes.

"Oh, Kiba, \_gross\_." Sakura says scrunching up her face.

It was a rushed plan, butâ€

All he needed was a Shadow Clone using the Transformation Technique, two low level genjutsu, and a minute.

(Kurenai-sensei will be proud if she ever realizes how much he retains from her genjutsu lessons)

Dosu and Kin are currently aggravated and chasing after Zaku's trail in the opposite direction while Zaku's trapped with them inside a sound barrier.

Akamaru is guarding the parameter mostly for the smell of snake.

He feels sluggish. His chakra is dangerously low, and he's seriously considering using a soldier pill.

"There's no one coming for you. You won't be able to call for help." He says derisively,

"No one will be able to hear you scream."

He's tired but there's something he has to do.

"Now," he says dangerously, "you're going to tell me exactly why you're going after Sasuke and what Orochimaru is to you."

"Like I'll tell you anything." The Oto ninja hisses.

"We already know you have a connection to Orochimaru, and that your whole team has their sight on Sasuke. What are you trying to do? Kidnap him? \_Kill\_ \_him\_?" Sakura demands.

"Hah, you don't know \_anything\_." Zaku mocks.

"I don't know," he says, "I think your scent changed on that last one. Killing Sasuke is your goal then?"

"What are you, a dog?" The Sound ninja scoffs

He restrains himself from glaring down at their paralyzed enemy; why does everyone keep thinking that's an insult?

"You want to kill him." He states confidently.

"So what? So what if I want to kill a self-entitled brat?" Zaku sneers.

"Then we'll stop you." He declares.

The Sound ninja laughs.

"Even if we don't kill the Uchiha brat, Lord Orochimaru will get him. He'll keep going until your precious Uchiha is \_dead\_. You'll get nothing from me." Zaku spits.

He growls.

They need more than these petty words to change things up; they need confirmation that Orochimaru is here with the ninja of Suna.

This is not up for debate; Sasuke is Sakura's precious teammate.

Sasuke is a fellow ninja of Konoha. Sasuke is a friend.

\_Sasuke is his comrade unto death.\_

"Sakura?" He asks pleasantly, "How good are you with your chakra blades again?"

A dark look falls over her face.

"Good enough for surgery." She answers back, fingers lighting up.

"Oh, well then." He says, "How unlucky for you."

He grins.

...

It takes longer than he'd like, but they get everything the Sound ninja knows.

They get the Sand and Sound alliance out of him.

How nice.

He's really impressed; turns out Sakura and he are really good at working together.

Their skills in \_questioning\_ are rather good too.

...

He waits for her to finish throwing up before offering his jacket.



She's covered in blood.

The smell is pungent, and he hates it. He thinks she hates it more.

When she's got herself covered up, he motions to Akamaru, and the ninken quickly makes his way over to the pink-haired girl.

She latches onto the ninken; her hands are clean from keeping a steady chakra film over them.

Akamaru has nothing to do with their plan to save Sasuke; the ninken has nothing negative attached to him.

He can't say the same for himself, so he keeps his distance.

Sakura has a distant look on her face, hands squeezing Akamaru roughly.

There's something he needs to ask.

"Do you regret it?"

She looks him in the eye,

"No."

...

They don't have time for her to change. They have information and a still living body that needs to be dealt with.

Akamaru finds the familiar smell of stone, dogs, and protection.

They run as fast as they can, and find him just outside the Hokage Residence; the tower next to the first stage of the Chunin Exams.

...

Kakashi stills and looks over Sakura with a narrow eye.

The jonin smells the blood that is not her own; he knows because it's absolutely wafting off of her.

"Kakashi-sensei, I-" Sakura chokes and looks down at her feet.

She's about to break down, he realizes.

"We ran into some trouble." He starts.

Kakashi's stare is hard, and he doesn't need to be a Yamanaka to figure out what's going through the jonin's mind.

He just hates to break it to the man; it's far worse than that.

Cold-blooded torture isn't remotely like self-defense, but he can't

say he feels guilty about it either.

He can't protect them all the time, but he can damn well try.

"We've got something you need to hear." He tells the man.

He wants to tell the man it's S-class sensitive; that it's important not to be overheard.

"Orochimaru is here, and he's after Sasuke." Sakura blurts out.

Kakashi stares down at her before grabbing her by the arm faster than he can blink.

He does blink, and they're both gone.

He shares a look with Akamaru, baffled.

Then Kakashi's suddenly there, "You too." He says.

The jonin grabs him from around the middle, grabs Akamaru with his other hand, and speeds off.

Though it's not as fast as the Body Flicker he subjected Sakura to, thank goodness.

...

"Kakashi tells me you have information on Orochimaru?"

The Third is a solemn face and even his scent speaks of tight-lidded emotions.

Sakura's fidgets next him in the tense and heavy atmosphere.

She's taking deep breaths, and he silently urges her to stay strong.

They got what they needed, but it was a heavy price.

He'll go first to give her a few moments to get it together.

"It started when Sakura noticed three ninja from Oto observing Sasuke. That wasn't so serious, but it kind of pissed me off, you know? Soâ€|"

He doesn't lie; he doesn't need to.

(Kurenai-sensei will probably give him hell later for doing something he shouldn't.

She never seems to believe him when he says it's not his fault.)

...

They're not allowed to know what happens next; they're just going to have to put their faith in the Third.

T&I has a body to get information out of, so there's that; the Hokage doesn't have a whole lot of time to implement a plan of action either.

Everything they know is picked apart—he's sure he's spent hours talking—and they almost don't leave Intelligence in time.

They have ten minutes before the exams start.

Missing the first stage would anger two Noble Clans, one clan of hell raisers, and all the customers wanting to see the last Uchiha.

They run to the academy.

Sakura burns her shirt and keeps his jacket. This leaves him in his mesh undershirt.

It's uncomfortable, but that's insignificant compared to what Sakura's feeling.

Akamaru reminds him to grab his headband off the jacket.

...

Sakura heads for her teammates, shaky but determined.

She doesn't look back at him, and he doesn't expect her too.

That doesn't stop it from stinging.

...

"Oi, sorry for cutting it close." He apologizes to Shino and Hinata, Akamaru at his heels.

Shino barely nods his acceptance and Hinata pokes her fingers together.

Hinata smells anxious, and Shino's kikaichu are buzzing more than usual.

"Are you alright?" Hinata asks him worriedly.

He tilts his head in silent question.

"You are almost late and do not have your jacket. Why? Sakura's wearing it, and she too is almost late. Neither of you are the type to "cut it close," or value your teammates so little to be doing frivolous activities before such an event." Shino states in his cold, concerned way.

He almost bursts out laughing; Akamaru has no such scruples.

Shino's asking him, "You weren't out having sex, so what did you do?" and Hinata's giving him that, "Did you stab yourself again, do you need bandages?" look.

He loves his teammates; he really does.

"I'll tell you the non-classified version later," he tells them,

"we've got to go."

He walks forward, Akamaru by his side, and they follow.

He doesn't know what's going to happen. He doesn't know if he's done the right thing, or if Sakura will ever forgive him.

The important thing isâ€”

He has no regrets.

End  
file.